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TRISCOMBE STONE

A ROMANCE OF

The Quantock Hills

By

PORTLAND BOARD AKERMAN

and

NORMAN HURST

WITH A FRONTISPIECE BY T. H. ROBINSON

LONDON:
BLISS SANDS & CO.
MDCCCXCVII

PREFACE

IT may perhaps add an additional interest to this Romance if the Reader is made aware of the fact that most of the characters depicted really existed in history or in the traditions of the neighbourhood in which the action of the story takes place.

We should like further to mention that the main incidents of the plot are founded upon facts that we believe have never been hitherto used by Novelists. This must be one of our excuses for placing before our Readers yet another story dealing with the period of Monmouth's Rebellion; the other excuse that has led us to write this volume is our love of Somerset, that Cinderella of the West, "where *Devonshire* cream and cider come from," and pure *Dorset* butter is churned. Our enthusiasm must be our apology for any shortcomings. We delight, O Somerset! in your junkets; we dote on your baked faggots (the receipt for which you allege the wily Scot has stolen from you and reproduced under the

disguise of "Haggis"); but your dialect!!—well, *we* will let that pass, as *we have taken liberties with it*, but your glorious scenery—we trust, we have done it no injustice in the pages of "Triscombe Stone."

THE AUTHORS.

LONDON, 1897.

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PROLOGUE

FIRST (A.D. 1657)

AS A MAN SOWS

THE sun was yet high in the heavens, and shone with unrestricted vigour upon the Quantock Hills, causing a gauzy shimmer to spread itself over the landscape below. Owing to the intense heat, work had almost entirely ceased, and there were few signs of life. A deathlike silence reigned, broken only by the hum of the myriads of insects as they flitted about among the flowers and purple heather that grew in abundance everywhere.

Numberless sheep lay dotted here and there upon the hills, panting beneath the scanty shade afforded them by some straggling and half-parched hawthorn bush, or friendly bank. Even the tall bracken bowed their stately heads beneath his solar majesty's relentless glare.

The red deer had betaken themselves to the coombes below, there to rest beneath the shadow of the small oaks and other trees that clustered in profusion. The coombes, viewed from the summit of a continuous range of hills along which ran a bridle or cart track almost from Quantock's Head to Taunton, had the appearance of huge masses of foliage endeavouring to creep serpent-like up the sides of the moist valleys until ultimately brought to a standstill for lack of adequate moisture.

In all this wide expanse of country but one human being was visible, and he—for it was a man—only appeared at fitful intervals upon the centre of the track that ran along the summit of the range. He frequently scanned the vast area of the heather-covered hills and glanced anxiously along the bridle-path in the direction of the town of Taunton, lying hidden behind the hills in a south-easterly direction. Then, as if satisfied with the inspection, he glided noiselessly back into his retreat among the bracken by the roadside.

A boulder of no mean proportions marked the spot of the man's disappearance; a boulder that has since been pointed out by some more enthusiastic than accurate member of the Archæological Society as the only remnant of what was once a Druidical circle, or by many a matter-of-fact and callous passer-by as a milestone. Crouching down behind this stone, the man was engaged in endeavouring to loosen a small piece of rock that was deeply embedded in the parched soil. The ominous exclamations which emanated now and again from the perspiring worker indicated the task to be no light one. At length, however, by the aid of a stout cudgel, mother Earth was induced to let go her tenacious hold. Having gained his end, the man rose from his crouching position, and again glanced eagerly to the southward.

Suddenly the blood left his face, which became white to the very lips, as in a husky, quavering voice he ejaculated, "At last!" and once more glided into his hiding place.

A solitary horseman, the cause of the man's excitement, had just ascended the brow of the hill. Like the rest of his fellow-creatures, he appeared over-

powered by the heat, for he rode with a slack rein. The horse, apparently suffering from the same cause as his master, ambled along with drooping head. The equestrian, evidently a gentleman by his attire, slowly approached, gazing vacantly before him as if lost in thought.

Nearer and nearer he came until almost abreast of the oulder.

Silently the crouching watcher rose, showing himself to be a man of uncommon stature. Poised high above his head, he held a piece of rock; the veins on his bare arms stood out like whipcords; and the muscles were distended to their utmost.

A murderous look of hate gleamed in his eyes as with an oath, he put forth all his strength and launched the missile with a deadly aim at the unsuspecting horseman, striking him full upon the forehead and hurling him to the ground with tremendous force. The horse, finding himself suddenly freed from his burden, started off with a neigh, galloped a hundred yards or so, and then resumed his course at a leisurely walk, stopping every now and again to crop a piece of herbage by the wayside.

Meanwhile the assailant again resumed his crouching attitude, and crept swiftly to the centre of the track. One look was sufficient as he bent over the motionless body. "No use vor 'ee," he hissed through his clenched teeth as he clutched his cudgel; "no use vor 'ee."

Robbery was evidently not the murderer's object, for after another hasty glance at the blood-bespattered face, he crept back among the bracken, made his way down the side of the hill, and was soon lost to sight in the sheltering coombes below.

The sun had sunk in the west. The myriads of insects had ceased to hum. The brilliantly-plumed yellow-hammer, tired of uttering her frequently repeated monotone, had at length betaken herself to the golden gorse, within the prickly shelter of which her nest lay snugly hidden.

Darkness crept over the land and covered the silent hills as with a shroud. One by one the stars peeped out as if calling to each other to gaze upon the tragedy that had been enacted upon the earth below. Gradually the harvest moon burst forth in all its grandeur and caused the twinkling heralds of the night to dwindle into insignificance before its glorious lustre.

At length the sound of voices broke the tranquil calm of the perfect summer night.

Along the bridle-path, a party of men wended their way, their footsteps muffled by the dewy turf. One man evidently acted as leader. Slowly the little band approached, their lanthorns now and again hidden by a dip in the road, to re-appear at fitful intervals like so many dancing fire-flies or Will-o'-the wisps.

On observing a dark object lying upon the track in front of him, the leader hastened forward. Bending down, he lifted the head of the prostrate man, and supporting it upon his knee threw the lanthorn's light full upon the ghastly face.

"My God!" he groaned as he started back with a shudder, "how shall I tell my poor young mistress?"

By this time his followers had come up and surrounded him. A look of horror spread over the countenances of the little group as they gazed upon the blood-stained face of the murdered man at their feet.

"Dead, dead!" were the only words uttered by him who had discovered the tragedy. "Dead, dead!" he murmured, "my poor young mistress! God help her to bear this blow."

Quickly a litter of boughs was made, and the corpse reverently lifted and gently placed upon it.

"Ah, zee 'ee here," said one, "here be the stone on which he struck his head."

"Yes," said another, "yonder big stone du look ghostly-like, and enough to vrighten any horse."

"Yes, yes," said the leader vehemently, suddenly waking from his reverie, "it was an accident—say it was an accident, say it was the stone the horse took fright at. Yes, the stone; my young mistress must be told that. She must never know," he muttered to himself, and he followed the mournful procession as it wended its way silently over hill and dale beneath the silvery rays of the harvest moon. It was a harvest of the dead.

"As a man sows, so shall he reap."

PROLOGUE SECOND — *A MIDNIGHT TRIUMPH*

AT the close of a dull and cheerless November day in the year 1679 a solitary pedestrian might have been observed walking at a brisk and restless pace to and fro along the short stretch of ill-paved and badly lighted pathway that ran from the comparatively newly-erected structure at Temple Bar to Chancery Lane, a thoroughfare then inhabited by numbers of the wealthiest merchants of the city of London.

The man who was so impatiently walking up and down appeared to be somewhat below the middle height, and, to judge from his costume, a member of the shopkeeping fraternity. His clean-shaven face wore a troubled expression as he glanced frequently in the same direction. He had evidently made an appointment that had not been kept. Suddenly he stopped in his walk, and drew his cloak more closely about him, as a protection against the keen night air. Long and anxiously he gazed at a tall figure to be seen rapidly approaching in his direction, and at length deciding it to be that of the man for whom he had waited so long, he advanced, and with an air of deference greeted the new-comer.

No sooner had the two men exchanged greetings than they hurried off down Fleet Street. The few people they met on their way seemed to cause the

late comer some little uneasiness, for he remarked: "Where are our friends, Disney? where are our friends?"

"Oh, have no fear, sir," answered the man addressed as Disney. "They will appear in good time; all hearts have been won, and as soon as the arrival is known the whole city will come forth into the streets."

"But what if it should be delayed until midnight?" queried his companion, with a certain amount of apprehension in his tone.

"No matter, sir," was the answer; "the watchmen have their orders from the magistrates; they know what they have to do. Have no fear, sir; have no fear," said Disney again, reassuringly.

By this time the two men had arrived at their destination, a small house at the lower end of Fleet Street. In answer to three single taps given with a sword-handle, bolts were withdrawn, and the door opened by an old woman, who conducted her visitors up the staircase into a room overlooking the street. The men had evidently been expected, for when lights were placed on the table a meal laid for two was disclosed.

Disney, when he had helped his companion to divest himself of the huge cloak in which he was enveloped, remained standing, whilst the other sat down to attack the viands set out on the table. In the uncertain light emitted by two flickering candles, the new-comer, now that he had taken off his cloak, looked a mere stripling. His dress was of the finest, and, as was customary with all gentlemen of the period, he carried a sword, the hilt of which was richly jewelled.

His face wore a thoughtful expression, and was

deeply bronzed by foreign travel; his hair, neither very dark nor very light, fell in thick, clustering curls upon his shoulders. His voice and bearing left no doubt in the mind as to his being a gentleman by birth and education.

He was evidently deep in thought as he ate his meal.

Suddenly looking up, he saw his companion still standing. "Pardon me, my good Disney," he said apologetically; "sit down and sup. I fear I kept you an unconscionable time, and you must be both cold and hungry; therefore, I pray you, eat, as even now there may be a long wait before us."

Disney accordingly seated himself at the table. Once more the young man relapsed into silence, and it was some time before either uttered a word. It was Disney who spoke first. Taking from his vest a document, he passed it across the table, saying, as he did so: "If it so please you, sir, would you do me the favour to read that, and give me your opinion thereon. I have been engaged for days and nights upon it, and am anxious to hear what you think of my work."

"You don't find me lively company, eh, Disney?" said the other, as he took the paper.

"Do not you mind me, sir," was the answer, whilst the speaker eagerly scanned the young man's countenance as he read.

Having finished reading, the youth returned the document, but with an evident air of abstraction. This occasioned the author to show so bitter a look of disappointment that it was at once observed by the other, who hastened to speak in order to remove the impression he had unintentionally conveyed. "Splendid, Disney, splendid! it must and shall suc-

ceed," saying which he rose from the table and strode to the casement, where he remained standing, with the same abstracted air as before.

Nothing appeared to be stirring without, with the exception of an occasional link-boy guiding some unsteady roysterer from the tavern to his lodging, or perhaps at intervals a huge, lumbering coach, accompanied by its pair of weary torch-bearers, rolling by on its way from the play-house.

By the dim light of a lamp, the watchman on the opposite side of the road could be discerned making himself comfortable for the night. Surely all London would soon be at rest—at least so thought the youth, and his face wore an increased look of anxiety as time went on.

"I tell you," he reiterated for the sixth time, "it will be too late."

Disney, who had finished his meal, suddenly rose and caught hold of the speaker's arm. "Hark, sir, hark!" he exclaimed in an excited tone, as the bells of a neighbouring church rang out a merry peal, that was answered by one church after another until even the most sleepy citizen must have been awakened.

Windows were thrown open, and heads thrust out of every casement; doors were unbarred, and master and apprentice sallied forth to swell the ever-increasing crowd in the streets; the silent thoroughfares of a few minutes before became alive with people, and all was bustle and excitement without.

Soon the crowd divided, and the two watchers saw Temple Bar in the distance lighted up as if it were on fire.

Cheer after cheer rang through the night air as the great crowd approached, headed by some members of the excited populace, drawing after

them trolleys upon which huge tar-barrels smoked and burned. The countless flambeaux and lanthorns carried by the mob reflected their light upon the thousands of diamond-shaped panes in the windows on either side of the street, giving colour to a scene as weird as it was picturesque.

Above all the confused babel and shouts of the people, one cry could be distinctly heard—"Monmouth! Monmouth!"

Disney leaned out of the window as the procession passed, whilst his companion stood silently by, only betraying his pent-up eagerness by occasionally grasping the handle of the sword at his side.

As the cause of all this popular rejoicing came into view, and his handsome face was seen turning first to the right, then to the left, while he bowed his acknowledgments to his admirers, Disney, unable to restrain his excitement, leaned farther out of the window, and waving his document, shouted at the top of his voice: "Monmouth! Monmouth! long live Monmouth!"

With an oath, his companion forcibly pulled him back into the room. "Man, are you mad?" he asked. Then, thinking that he had been a little too severe, he continued in a softer tone: "I don't want to see you in a cart on the way to Tyburn. You will betray us all if you allow your excitement to get the better of your judgment in this manner. Take my advice and restrain yourself—for all our sakes, and more especially for your own."

Disney meekly accepted the rebuke, and said, as he saw the other making preparations to depart: "Are you going, sir?"

"Yes, my friend," was the answer; "it is getting late, and you, Disney, have a long walk to Lambeth.

I will report your faithful services in the right quarter, rest assured of that, and will pass over your little indiscretion. Beware of foot-pads, and keep that paper well out of sight and in safe custody, or it will be Tyburn, you traitor," he concluded, with a smile.

Both descended the stairs, and were let out by the old woman who had admitted them.

In the street the frantic cheers of the mob could still be heard, becoming fainter and fainter in the distance. The progress of the triumphal procession could easily be traced as it wended its way eastward by the lurid reflection in the sky.

One by one the church-bells ceased to peal, and soon all was again quiet. Nothing remained save the remembrance of that memorable night when the most popular man in England passed in triumph through the streets of London, cheered and lauded on all sides by the enthusiastic citizens.

"Good-night, Disney."

"Good-night, sir."

These were good-nights that should have been farewells.

As they parted, each going in a different direction, the casement on the opposite side of the way was gently closed, and the great city once again settled itself down to finish the slumber from which it had been so rudely awakened.

CHAPTER FIRST

HEATHERCOMBE MANOR

SOME few miles to the northwards of the town of Bridgewater, in the county of Somerset, at an almost equal distance from the county town of Taunton, and just beyond the precincts of the village of Over Stowey, stands, or rather stood in the year of our Lord 1684, the Manor House of Heathercombe.

Nestling beneath the shadow of the Quantock Hills, this quaint old English homestead looked delightfully cool and enticing on a scorching hot August afternoon in that never-to-be-forgotten summer. For months rain had not fallen, and so parched had the land become, and the herbage so burnt up, that the country folks were reduced to feeding their cattle upon the hay that should have served them for the coming winter. This necessarily caused a most grievous rise in the price of butter, milk, and indeed provisions of every kind.

But to return to the Manor House. Heathercombe had, according to all accounts, been built in the reign of Henry VIII., but was probably not nearly finished until just after Queen Elizabeth had ascended the throne.

The exterior was of rough stonework, its reddish tinge indicating that the material had been hewn from a neighbouring quarry. The several buildings that composed the house formed almost a quadrangle, at the corner of which a tower was situated, giving a

picturesque finish to the whole, and serving the useful purpose of carrying upon its summit the main stack of chimneys. Above the fine old doorway the arms of the family who had originally owned the Manor were carved. The heavy oaken doors, ornamented as they were with nail heads, presented a truly massive and imposing appearance. In the centre of one of the panels was to be seen a wicket that, from the style of its workmanship, might have been added at a much later period.

The magnificent hall, with its panelled oak walls, ornamented like the external doors with nail heads, its quaint square windows with carved spandrels, its handsome open-timbered roof and huge fireplace, at once gave the idea of comfort and hospitality. At the lower end of the room, three doorways led into the kitchen and servants' offices, whilst the door at the upper end opened into the tower that contained a staircase and passages communicating with the other wings of the building.

In the rear of the hall stood the dining-room, with a door at one end opening upon an ample staircase leading to the sleeping apartments. The upper part of the tower also contained a couple of small bedrooms that, by reason of their being rather out of the way, were seldom used. The spacious drawing-room was situated above the dining-room, and a series of vaults ran beneath the whole house.

The history of this quaint, old, rambling Manor was as peaceful as its situation was secluded. Never built for defence, its outer walls bore no trace of musket or cannon shot, so common in many of its contemporaries, yet its courtyards and terraces had echoed upon more than one occasion during the great war to the clatter of armed men and their steeds.

Indeed, both the King's as well as the Cromwellian soldiers had been billetted at different times upon its inmates, but, as we have said before, up to the time of which we are writing, the ruthless hand of War had left no traces of her ravages upon the Manor of Heathercombe.

Upon the sideboard in the old majestic hall stood a beaker that had many a time been drained by a gaily-dressed gallant to the health of the inmates or to the confusion of the Parliament, whilst close beside it lay a soiled copy of the Testament, left behind by Corporal Hezekiah Makepeace, when in quest of some fugitive said to be in hiding in one of the many coombes with which the Quantock Hills abound.

Standing slightly back from the road and facing the west, the front of the Manor House is bathed in sunshine upon this particularly warm August afternoon, while the masses of shrubs and noble towering elms at each end of the building give it a delightfully peaceful and cool appearance.

The only signs of life here are represented by an old deerhound which, finding the path too hot even for him, lies stretched at full length upon the grass beneath the shadow of a small box-tree, and has composed himself for an afternoon nap in blissful ignorance of the laws of nature; and on an adjacent wall a majestic peacock, sunning himself in calm contentment and self-satisfaction. Upon the terrace on the shady side of the house are seated beneath the spreading branches of a glorious old elm-tree the Lord of the Manor of Heathercombe, with his wife and daughter. The trio are enjoying the beautiful prospect that stretches before their eyes like a panorama—a study in green fields and purple

heather, losing itself in the distant water of the Bristol Channel, with just a glimpse of the Welsh coast in hazy outline beyond.

Squire Hewlyn, although past his prime, is still a hale and noble type of an English gentleman. His strong, clear-cut features are eloquent both of intellectual vigour and of a tenacious courage that have served their owner in good stead in bygone years when as yet he was not the master of Heathercombe, and he had been called upon more than once to face in obstinate encounter the Royalist forces in the West. The broad open forehead and bright grey eye speak no less plainly of the honesty of character that distinguished him in those same stirring times. He was far above the average county gentleman of his age, who could, as a rule, be considered but an ill-bred, narrow-minded bigot; seeing nothing of the world beyond his immediately surrounding county, hating every sort of foreigner, and with a position about equal from a social point of view to that of a small farmer of the present day. A very different stamp of man was Squire Hewlyn. He had travelled and seen the world, and was for the seventeenth century highly educated. He took the keenest delight and interest in his home and its surroundings, virtues that could not be ascribed to most of his contemporaries, who, as long as they had a weather-tight roof over their heads, cared little about beautifying their dwellings. In like manner, as long as the garden yielded a sufficiency for their wants, they troubled little for anything beyond. Hospitable the country gentleman always was, but then there was scanty refinement about his hospitality. His table was spread with such a profusion of viands and liquid refreshment that the conclusion of the

feast found the majority of the guests in recumbent positions beneath the board upon which they had lately fared not wisely but too well.

To his wife, who sits beside him, the Squire exhibits an affectionate and stately courtesy altogether in keeping with the estimate formed of his character and disposition. It is easy to see that, although no longer young, she is the junior of her husband by some half-a-score years, and there is no doubt that in her young days she must have been a beautiful woman. Her face has even now a calm loveliness of its own, the soft blue, kindly eyes depicting a gentleness of soul, that makes the keen observer conscious he is looking upon a woman whose love pervades the whole atmosphere of the household.

The other figure in our picture is that of a young girl of some nineteen years of age, tall, without being obtrusively so, with a perfectly symmetrical figure and daintily poised head, from which a profusion of light brown hair falls in clustering ringlets upon her shoulders, throwing into relief a face in which the grey eyes of the father are blended with the sweet expression of the mother, a face that leaves no doubt in the observer's mind of the ability of the owner to command as well as to implore, and one likely to leave a lasting impression upon those privileged to behold it.

Such was Grace Hewlyn, the Squire's only child, and a sweet picture of maidenly innocence she makes as she sits there busily engaged with her embroidery frame.

"Tell me, father, dear," says Grace, turning to the Squire, as her busy fingers ceased their work for a moment, "what is the news in Bridgewater to-day? How goes the King? Has the price of butter risen? Is there any prospect of rain, or war, or——"

"Stay, stay, my girl," interposes the Squire, laughing; "one question at a time, I pray. First of all, as to how goes the King. Of this our informant says little, except that His Majesty goes as well or as ill as is his usual wont. But we are informed that there are indications of a movement on the part of the supporters of His Grace of Monmouth; whether there be truth in this said rumour I know not," concluded the Squire.

"And the rain and the butter of which the child asked?" says Mistress Hewlyn, with the inquisitive instincts of a good housewife upon such important subjects. "What say they of them?"

"Of the rain and butter," answered the Squire, "I fear that I have naught but ill news to tell, for it seems there is as little chance of the one coming down as of the other."

"That is indeed a bad report, father. How think you we shall get through the winter should the weather continue as it is now? Only yesterday our good friend John Swaine told me that he had need to feed his beasts upon this year's crop of hay for nigh upon six weeks."

"Ah, well," rejoins the Squire, "I have always found that a good Providence has a way of righting these things in the end, but if Jack is hard put to it this winter he will not find me press him for his rent. I think he knows that full well, although he has never yet put me to the test."

"And now, child," interposes Mistress Hewlyn, "go see that our dish of tea is served us here, and change your gown in honour of Sir Mark, who joins us."

Grace obeys her mother, as she has always been taught to do from her infancy, though upon this occasion she inwardly resents the changing of her attire, any physical effort upon such an afternoon being ex-

ceedingly trying; still, she wishes to please her parents, knowing how they view the visits of Sir Mark Noble.

Squire Hewlyn, although a staunch Puritan, looks upon his daughter's marriage with Sir Mark, who is a Roman Catholic, from what he is pleased to call a worldly point of view. Many a time has he weighed the matter in his mind, and he has always arrived at the same conclusion, namely, that the marriage could but be an advantageous one. Was not Sir Mark as handsome and fine-looking a young fellow as one could wish to meet in a day's march, and further, did not his estates adjoin those of Heathercombe? Therefore, he argued with himself, why let his religious prejudices stand in the way of his daughter's future happiness and prosperity? He had talked the matter over with his good wife, and she had agreed with her husband's views on the subject. Thus it is that we find, at the commencement of our story, Sir Mark Noble welcomed to Heathercombe as a suitor for the hand of the Squire's daughter.

Grace, having changed her attire, returned to her parents, and she has not been seated long ere a tall figure is seen approaching the family group.

Sir Mark, for it is he, is attired somewhat after the manner of the Court gallants of the day. He wears a coat of the then favourite sad-colour, with black buttons and white sleeves, breeches of purple shag,* black-fringed gloves, and a black hat with a silver twisted hat-band. In his hand he carries a fashionable French cane, hung over his wrist by a betasseled riband. His hair, worn in the long, flowing ringlets of the period, is black; his features are clearly defined; his dark brown eyes are surmounted by a pair of rather heavy

* A cloth with a long nap.

black eyebrows; he has a well-shaped nose and mouth, the upper lip of which is ornamented by a slight moustache curled at the ends. Such are the features of as handsome a face as one might wish to see—at least so think the three as he makes his obeisance to them.

After the usual flow of compliments, Sir Mark Noble draws the high-backed chair that has been placed for him up to Grace's side, and watches her intently as she works at her embroidery.

"Oh," says the Squire presently, "there is a piece of news I had almost forgotten to tell you. This morning, in Bridgewater, I received a letter brought me by the skipper of a Dutch barque now in port, from my godson, Hubert Annersley, of whom I have heard no word this year and more, since he with many others followed into exile His Grace of Monmouth."

"'Tis well you hear of your favourite once again," interrupts Mistress Hewlyn, "though why he be a favourite of yours I fail to fathom, unless it be on his dead mother's account. Why, the lad hath not deigned to visit us since he, as a child, did make his abode under our roof."

"I know your kindly nature far too well, my dear," returns the Squire in his courtly way, "to feel that your motherly instinct does in reality grudge this poor lad, left in the world without a mother's care, or a father's helping hand, the interest that I take in him, not so much for his dead parents' sake as for his own, for I like the boy, and feel that I ever shall, as though he were a son of my own."

Mistress Hewlyn smiles, as though pleased with her husband's allusion to herself.

"I cannot call to mind that I have ever heard tell of this godson of yours," says Sir Mark, joining in the conversation for the first time.

"That," answers the Squire, "I can with ease account for. When Hubert lived with us, now many a year gone by, you were a youth, and we knew you not as we do now. Why, he and my Grace were playmates together. Do you not call to mind," continued the old man, addressing his daughter, "how young Hubert one day when you, a little toddling lass, had strayed away, and in escaping from the furious attack of an old gander had fallen into a ditch, pulled you out, and brought you home covered in duckweed, for all the world like a little Jack-in-Green, and a very evil-smelling one too? If I remember right, your good mother could never get rid of the odour of the foul water into which you fell. As a last resource she gave the dress to Mistress Carew for her daughter, and the poor woman got soundly rated by our good parson for not engendering more cleanly habits in her child," concludes the Squire, laughing heartily at the reminiscence.

"That is so very long ago, father, dear," says the girl, blushing, "that I can hardly be expected to remember; but what says Hubert's letter?"

"That ere long he may return to his native land, when we may expect a visit from him; and heartily glad I shall be to see his cheery face again within my doors," answers her father.

Sir Mark shifts uneasily in his seat. The more he hears of Hubert Annersley, the less he likes the idea of his return. He knows not why, but he feels a growing aversion to this man whom he has never seen.

The Squire continues to talk of Annersley, recalling incidents that had occurred during his stay with them, and making humorous allusions to the many scrapes into which he and Grace had fallen—allusions, for some reason or other, not apparently relished by

Grace. At the first opportunity Mistress Hewlyn whispers to her husband not to continue a conversation evidently so distaseful to the young couple. Having finished her tea, she rises, and making an apology to Sir Mark, enters the house, whither she is shortly after followed by the Squire.

The young people being left alone, Grace breaks the silence by remarking how strange it is she cannot call to mind the incidents to which her father has alluded.

"I beg you, fair Mistress Grace," says Sir Mark, "not to trouble your sweet head about this fellow, who, I feel sure, cannot be worthy of your consideration; but tell me of yourself, and how you fare this hot weather."

"Oh, well enough, Sir Mark," replies Grace, only too pleased to change the conversation. "I was yesterday at the Mill to see Jack Swaine, and a doleful tale he had to tell, all on account of this dry summer. Then I have engaged his cousin, Kate Fletcher—but perhaps you know her not by name. She is the step-daughter of John Coombs of the 'Lamb' Inn at Bridgewater, and is to come to me as my handmaiden, when my present one weds, early next spring."

"I remember," says Sir Mark, "to have seen a maid when passing the Mill; mayhap 'tis the girl of whom you speak. If it be so, she is a comely wench, but, pardon me, hardly suited, I should think, to wait upon so fair a mistress."

"And wherefore not?"

"She can be but a country wench, unversed in the duties of a lady's maid. Now my mother has a *protégée* in London town, a woman skilled in the arts of the toilet, of whom I have heard her speak. Let me persuade you to engage this girl, and thus have a fitting maid to wait upon so fair a lady," concludes Sir Mark gallantly.

"I cannot retract my word," says Grace, "besides, I like Kate, and have known her ever since she was a child."

"As you will, fair Mistress Grace; since you are bent on this I would not dissuade you; I but thought to render you some slight service."

"By suggesting that my toilet required greater skill," interposes Grace archly. "All the same, I thank you from my heart, Sir Mark, for your kind thought, but my mind is settled."

"Then, fair lady, 'tis but for me to bow," responds her lover, suiting the action to the word, "for skilled or unskilled though your handmaiden may be, you cannot help appearing as nature has made you—beautiful. And now to state to you the object of my mission here. In addition to beholding your sweet self, it is to ask you to honour us with your presence, and that of your good father, at a hawking party we propose to hold in a few weeks hence, should the scheme meet with your approval."

"That with my parents' consent will I gladly do," answers Grace quickly, for she is passionately fond of every kind of sport.

"Then, fair maid, the consent is as good as given, and so adieu, and my respects to your most worthy parents." And taking the girl's hand lightly in his own, and pressing his lips to it, with a prodigious bow, Sir Mark Noble walks away, leaving Grace standing beneath the shadow of the ancient elm watching the retreating figure with a thoughtful expression upon her fair young face. Long after her visitor is lost to sight she is awakened from her reverie by the old deer-hound, which has crept up to her side, and is pushing his cold nose into her hand to attract attention. Looking down, she pats the dog's head fondly, and with a sigh walks slowly in the direction of the house.

CHAPTER SECOND — *THE HAWKING PARTY*

ALTHOUGH it was not yet the end of October, there were indications when the day fixed for the hawking party arrived that Jack Frost was preparing to tighten his grip upon lane, field, and fallow. This day's sport had given rise to much discussion among the fair equestriennes of the immediate neighbourhood as to the propriety of following the extravagant Court fashions of the period. If not for weeks, it had for days formed the one topic of conversation. The ladies sat in solemn conclave upon so important a subject, but their deliberations, as might have been expected, did not bring about perfect unanimity of opinion. Many agreed with the advice given, but at the same time inwardly determined to follow their own individual taste in the matter. A few only favoured the customs then in vogue at King Charles's Court, for the King had long since grown tired of enacting the rôle of national dress reformer that he had at first attempted to play, and had allowed his courtiers to relapse into the lavish and effeminate habits prevalent during the reign of his father. Here in distant Somerset, far away from the great seat of fashion, the advocates of Court dress were in a minority, for even the influence of the Throne could not break through the

more simple habits and customs of the people. In the West, the teachings of the Puritans were engrained even in the systems of the rich; and the poor, who took no part or lot, by necessity, in the frivolities of the Cavaliers, were Covenanters by training, and probably by instinct. Still the women, even Puritan women, who only painted their cheeks with tints of modesty, were prone to discuss the question of dress, an immortal subject.

When the much-talked-of day broke, a slight mist hung over the white fields which, however, was soon dispersed by the still powerful sun. Dewdrops sparkled on the mysterious elfin webs in the hedge-rows, and large clusters of red berries upon the bushes must have gladdened the heart of every member of the feathered tribe that caught sight of Nature's bountiful provision for the coming winter. As the slight frost of the night before disappeared under the influence of a rising temperature, it left on hedges, fields, and roads a moisture, causing the air to give forth a freshness and fragrance that could not fail to send the blood coursing through the veins of even the most jaded *roué* or sleepy rustic. No more perfect day ever gladdened the heart of a sportsman, at least so thought Squire Hewlyn as he and his daughter mounted their well-groomed hacks, and wended their way towards Stow Hall. The Squire felt in excellent fettle. All his keen sporting instincts were fully aroused by the auspiciousness of the surroundings, and Grace, riding by his side, caught the infection of his high spirits. She laughed heartily at his sallies, and blushed when he alluded to her personal charms, and the effect they would undoubtedly create upon the man whose hospitality they were about to accept.

"How can you think that, father? he has never spoken to me of love," she was saying.

"I don't want you to tell me, child, what he has said —a lot of nonsense, I'll be bound—but his look is quite sufficient. I tell you, lass, a man does not gaze upon a pretty face for an hour by the dial, without being in love, it is plain, my girl. If he be not far gone in love for thee, then write me down a fool."

"I shall never, never, never marry, father," replied the girl emphatically.

"Tut, tut, child," the Squire retorted in his bluff, hearty way, "you must be far gone in love yourself, methinks, to talk of marriage so early, for marriage comes after love."

After this Grace thought it wise to change the subject.

"Look, father dear, you can see the Hall from here," she said.

"Yes," answered the other. "I always think the best view of it is to be had from this hill, for when you come to the avenue the trees hide the house somewhat," and then the old soldier, not to be caught by a feint of the enemy, returned to the charge. "A grand demesne truly, and one of which my lady will make a proud mistress, I trow."

"If you allude to me, father, I shall never love any home as I do dear old Heathercombe, although it is not so pretentious nor so large. I always think that the Hall looks more dreary and exposed than the Manor."

"Yes, child, but Heathercombe cannot be compared to this estate, and if you love the man in the house I daresay you can put up with the colder aspect outside. I never found the outside of the Manor trouble your mother much."

At this both laughed merrily and made their horses break into a trot. They were now riding through the stately avenue of elms to which Squire Hewlyn had alluded. The mighty overhanging branches were interlocked one with the other, as if forming a league to resist the efforts of the light in its endeavour to penetrate the obstruction they caused, but with only partial success, for small patches of the blue sky overhead were here and there visible, while the rooks lifted their wings and hopped from branch to branch cawing incessantly.

From the end of the avenue a grassy slope could be seen that led to a terraced walk running along the entire front of the house. Stow Hall differed in many respects from Heathercombe Manor. The absence of trees had the effect of throwing out in bold relief against the sky the architectural outlines of the building. This it was that gave it the bleak aspect Grace had described. At the same time it commanded a view of the surrounding landscape not excelled by any house in the country. The magnificent avenue below, when seen from its windows, appeared dwarfed.

Standing in groups on the grassy slope and upon the terrace were some fourscore or more men and women. It was noticeable that the minority of the ladies in council must have carried the day, for colour was conspicuous by its presence, even the horses appearing to vie with one another's gaudy trappings, while they tossed their heads in the air as if they one and all claimed superiority. Servants worked their way from group to group with dishes well piled with viands, or beakers filled with sparkling wine. Below on the greensward stood the falconers with the birds and dogs surrounded by the horses that the retainers

found it all their work to hold in check. All seemed animated and vivacious in the anticipation of the pleasure of the day's sport.

As the assembly noticed Squire Hewlyn and his daughter approaching, it was evident by the shout raised that with their arrival the party was completed.

The Squire alighted, and Grace looked shyly at her father when Sir Mark came towards them, and assisted her to dismount. With the characteristic courtesy of the times, he conducted his fair visitor to his mother who was seated on the terrace. Grace felt the situation acutely, for she was the cynosure of all eyes as she approached Lady Malda. She made her courtesy with becoming modesty, and her ladyship soon put her at ease by entering pleasantly into conversation with very much more freedom than was her wont. It might easily have been supposed that Lady Malda had long since passed the prime of life, although in reality her age was but forty-five. She was tall and dark, with a tinge of Spanish blood in her veins, as her bright piercing eyes and jet black hair, slightly streaked with grey, plainly indicated. Her features, too, were finely chiselled. Her carriage and manner gave strangers the impression of a cold *hauteur* that did not permit of a close friendship, yet she was kindness itself in times of sickness and need, as many poor souls could testify. This was her bearing to her inferiors; to her equals she appeared, as we have said, to stand upon the other side of an impassable barrier. Those who knew her before her marriage described her as a high-spirited girl, but her short married life and widowhood of twenty-seven years had wrought much change. Her son was yet unborn when his father met his death by an accident as he was on his way home across the Quantock Hills, and ever since the day

her husband's lifeless body was brought home, she seemed to exist only for two objects—the welfare of her boy, and the relief of the sick and poor. Not even Squire Hewlyn and his bountiful wife were held in greater reverence by the cottagers than the proud-faced lady of Stow Hall.

But we digress. To-day, at any rate, the mother had thrown aside her reserve, for she had resolved that her son's entertainment should be a success. The company were growing impatient and many were on the move towards the horses. Sir Mark, once again came to the assistance of Grace, mounted, and led the way, closely followed by the remainder of the party. Looking back, he waved his hand to his mother, who stood motionless on the terrace and watched the start of the meet.

"Which direction are we going to take to-day?" asked the Squire in a loud voice, for he was riding behind his host at a discreet distance, the latter's horse by some unaccountable means, probably not entirely unconnected with the will of the rider, having taken an extraordinary liking to the animal Grace was riding. Sir Mark turned in his saddle as he replied:

"Straight away to Howard's farm, then across Long Mead making for Robin's Copse, and home, will be the best beat to-day, I reckon."

"A very long beat, too," answered the Squire.

"Not too long for you, Mistress Grace, I vow," said Sir Mark.

"Oh, no. He will take me that far easily enough, for even the horses seem to enter into the pleasures of the sport upon a day like this," Grace answered, partly addressing Sir Mark, and partly the animal she was riding, as she gently patted its arched neck.

"The distance is none too great for the horse It

should be proud to carry so pretty and light a burden for twice the distance," Sir Mark added gallantly.

"I thank you for your compliment, sir, but I am not so light a weight as you imagine, and I expect he will be glad to be rid of me and to again be comfortably in his stall."

"There you do your horse an injustice. If he could only speak, he would assuredly affirm——"

"Affirm what?" interrupted Grace, laughing merrily. "That I am not a light weight?"

"No," added the other; "that he preferred you to any other rider. I am sure mine would willingly exchange."

"Your horse no doubt learns his manners from his master."

"Maybe," said Sir Mark, smiling, "then we shall both be sorry when we have to part company."

Squire Hewlyn was riding too closely behind, Grace evidently thought, for she glanced at him trying to detect whether or no he had heard Sir Mark's honeyed words. The girl feared his shafts on the homeward journey, and she was glad when one of the party called a halt, having discovered a sitting hare. A man hurried towards the crouching animal. Starting, it pricked up its ears, as if astonished at the situation; then, setting them well back, shot off with the intention of placing as great a distance as possible between the crowd of guests and itself. There was no need for them all to shout "Howe! howe! howe!" for no hare could run any faster. And surely no hawk could now see, much less overtake the swift-footed animal. But a hood had been removed, and in another moment the bird left its holder's fist. Swiftly it flew on. Now it was abreast of its quarry—then it stooped—and like a lightning flash the prey was struck with the

deadly and cruel beak. There was a cry like that of a child in pain; the falconer galloped after his bird and replaced it upon the perch; the first sight had been a kill, and the game was held up by the owner of the bird in triumph.

The following flight was not so fortunate, for the next bird that was unhooded came up with its quarry just as a high hedge was reached, and the hare, doubling back, ran down the side, free, leaving the baffled bird perched upon one of the topmost branches as if ashamed of its fruitless efforts. Some minutes elapsed before it could be coyed back to its possessor, who was not put in the best of moods by the jeers and jibes of his companions. So the sport continued. Sometimes a partridge was the quarry, but whatsoever was the victim, the time passed merrily, for there were many incidents to cause a jest.

"The sun is uncommonly hot," said Sir Mark, addressing the Squire during an interval in the sport; "think you, if we called at Ashton Mill your tenant would hand round some of his cider?" and he pointed with his whip as he spoke to a homestead not far distant.

"Without a doubt," the other replied, "it will be worth our while to go so little out of our way to taste its quality, for I know it to be excellent. The dogs, also, would like the stream, judging by the present length of their tongues."

The whole cavalcade were not long in moving towards the building indicated by Sir Mark. Soon the dull thud, thud of the cumbersome wheel, turning the heavy stones, became audible and the splash of the water as the massive oaken blades struck the stream vainly trying to lift it, but only causing a thousand particles to fall back again into the rushing waters

below. The noise of the approaching horses brought the miller to the door.

Some men can pass in a crowd unnoticed; not so John Swaine, who stood a head and shoulders above his fellows. Yet he was not ungainly, for he was well proportioned and, as he appeared in the doorway with his arms bared right above the elbows, his great muscular power was apparent. His face was a pleasure to behold, the large dark eyes pointing to an openness and frankness of character that could be vouched for by all who had dealings with their owner. His hair was curly and dark, that is, it should have been, but just now white prevailed, even his eyebrows forming a resting-place for flour. A shy man by nature, he looked sheepishly at the imposing company approaching him, but, happily, to a great extent, the covering upon his face hid his confusion.

"Jack, my lad, we've come to pay 'ee a visit," said the Squire, in answer to his tenant's respectful salutation, "for the sun is mighty fierce and our throats be dry, and I want you to let us taste your cider. Some of your foreign cider, lad, for Sir Mark, here," the speaker added with a wink.

"You be right welcome, zir, and I hope your sport 'a been good," he said as he turned to enter the house.

The horses and dogs were making the most of the halt, and were drinking and lapping the sparkling water that flowed by the side of the road; indeed the whole party seemed glad of the opportunity afforded for rest.

Presently a girl was seen coming down the little, irregularly flagged garden-path to the gate, carrying a large earthenware pitcher and two drinking cups. She appeared to be about seventeen years of age, her figure was shapely, and her jet black hair hung in

wavy profusion down her back. Her face was pale, but as she came nearer the group and felt that their gaze was upon her, the colour mounted to her cheeks and enhanced the beauty of her features. That she was a relative of the man who had just entered the house went without saying, for there was no mistaking those large, lustrous dark eyes and beautiful regular lashes.

"Ah, Kate, how kind of you!" exclaimed Grace, as the girl poured out some deliciously cool-looking milk and proffered it to her future mistress who raised the cup to her dainty lips and took a long draught of the refreshing liquid; "this is much nicer than that nasty sour cider you are drinking," Grace said, turning to Sir Mark.

"Cider, my lady? by gad, the country might be proud if it could turn out such cider as this, eh, Master Swaine?" exclaimed the other with a laugh.

"I thought Master Jack's foreign cider would please you, Sir Mark," chimed in the Squire.

"Come," continued the baronet, "I will have some milk also if there is any left. Canary and milk, Squire, what can you want better?" and he reached out and took the cup from the trembling hand of Kate Fletcher. She raised her eyes to the rider for a moment, but it was only for a moment, for the long lashes drooped and her eyes sought the ground.

"Say there be more in the house, Kate, and that they be welcome to it," called Mistress Swaine, who had come to assist in appeasing the claims of the thirsty horsemen, and her duties being ended, now stood at the gate in order to gaze in amazement at the beautiful dresses worn by her sex.

"We are welcome, I know, my good dame," said the

Squire kindly, "but all have had enough and we must make the most of a day, now none too long."

The party moved off to further revel in the sport as they worked their way back to the Hall, leaving the three inmates of the Mill watching the merry company depart with a feeling akin to wonderment at so unexpected a visit and the sight of so much grandeur.

"A pretty wench, that miller's girl," said a foppish-looking man with a weak voice, as he reined up his horse close to Sir Mark's side, "with a face, odds bobs, that would create a sensation in May Fair or Spring Gardens without any powder or patch, dash it."

"I must leave you to be the best judge of a pretty face, my lord," answered Sir Mark; "for my part, I see no beauty in a country maid; the miller is her cousin."

"What! that giant fellow?" the other asked in the same insipid tone.

"That *strong* fellow," Sir Mark answered significantly; "he is going to wed her," and saying this he touched his horse with his spurs and was soon again at Grace Hewlyn's side.

More than one horsewoman in the party noticed the manner in which Grace Hewlyn monopolised the companionship of her handsome cavalier, and wondered what he could see in a girl of appearance so modest, who wore only a dove-colour gown with long sleeves and lace ruffles, and but a plain stomacher laced with very ordinary pink laces, and a petticoat of a similar hue which could just be seen peeping from beneath the plainly-cut gown. It was far too simple, some whispered, and not flowered or worked as it should have been. However, these disparaging comments did not reach the wearer's ears, for she was too much occupied with the gaiety of her surroundings.

"What do you think of my maid now that you have

seen her?" Grace asked her companion, as the tired-out party wended their way homewards.

"I cannot find fault with your choice, Mistress Grace, but methinks your best interests would have been served in having one better versed in fashion. My mother would get you someone from London if you sent this girl away to gain experience."

"I must try and learn the troublesome fashion, Sir Mark, and if I offend I pray you will not spare your censure. I do not like strangers, and Kate I nursed and carried about when I was only a tiny thing myself. There, sir, I see your mother upon the terrace waiting for us. How kind she must be to fatigue herself by entertaining all these people here."

"Very," replied Sir Mark absently, as Grace continued:

"And everyone is hungry too, I know. I thought as I saw the dining-hall tables this morning, loaded with dainties, that you must have provided for all the county. I expect Lady Malda will be glad when we have gone; do you know, I always feel glad when everyone has left and all has passed off successfully."

"A somewhat doubtful compliment to your departed guests, Mistress Grace."

"Oh, I don't mean that, Sir Mark, but you don't know the trouble and anxiety the preparations are to all concerned. You men see everything ready, and fancy it has all been prepared in fairyland, when really the preparations have to be thought out days before, and give one such a lot of worry."

"You really ought to confide your thoughts to your guests before they arrive so as to make them feel quite at home," the other answered jestingly; "but it would not spoil the appetites of some of my visitors who come early and will remain until late, I fear; and to be also

candid I shall not be sorry when I am able to review the day," he added confidentially.

"That appears to me like a doubtful compliment," the girl broke in with a little mocking laugh. "I shall leave early, Sir Mark, but I shall not let you spoil my appetite."

"Come, then, let me help you to dismount." Sir Mark leapt to the ground, and handed his reins to a servant. Taking hold of the bridle, he led her horse to the riding steps, and assisted Grace to descend. As the host conducted her into the house she noticed the massive doors with the escutcheon of the Noble family over all of them, the solid stone-work of the walls, the large, lofty rooms, and the big oak furniture; yet in spite of the hundreds of candles that seemed to be burning everywhere, the blazing log fires in the capacious grates, and the crowd of noisy men and women, the size of the apartments caused a convulsive shudder to pass over her as she thought of the place without this life. Was this the house of which she was to be the future mistress? She had often been at the Hall before, but it was the first time that she had experienced the present sensation.

. . . . . .

Sir Mark was right. Some of the guests intended to remain late, for when Grace Hewlyn rode homewards with her father, accompanied by a man-servant from the Manor to light the way, very few of the company had departed. The windows of the dining-hall were open, and the light from within streamed out upon the terrace. Judging from the shouting and laughter that emanated from the room, the company were getting hilarious, and would not be capable of much riding that night. The day had been full of excitement to Grace, and she felt tired now that it was all over. The

Squire had also enjoyed the sport, but although he did not feel fatigued he was silent. His thoughts were sad as he rode home by his daughter's side. He pictured to himself the day not far distant when his beautiful child would be forsaking her old father and mother for a newer and stronger love, and he dreaded to think what Heathercombe would be like without her sunny presence to brighten its daily life.

CHAPTER THIRD

THE LAMB INN

THE town of Bridgewater in the year 1684 laid claim to being a seaport, although the vessels, the largest of which in all probability registered no more than three hundred tons, had to follow the muddy, snake-like course of the River Parret some dozen miles from its mouth in the Bristol Channel ere they were able to discharge their cargoes at the quay built by the enterprising townsfolk. The formation of this somewhat straggling little place at the period of which we are writing would be most correctly described if we said that it represented more closely than anything else the letter Y with the Parret flowing at its base.

The river was crossed by a quaint and narrow, three-arched, wooden bridge, enabling the villager from the adjacent hamlets upon the moors, and the traveller by the stage waggon from such flourishing cities as Bath, or Bristol, or the then almost inaccessible golden city of London, to supply the hundred and one wants of the seafaring men who frequented the port, and to cross to the town proper. Upon the east bank a number of low, white cottages, many having shutters that, when open, served the double purpose of letting in the light of day and of forming a counter upon which the busy shopkeeper could display his wares. When these shutters were raised

at night, being strongly made, they would not only defy the attack of the elements, but were proof against the intrusion of burglariously-inclined members of the community. This portion of the town, if the few buildings located there might be honoured by so high-sounding an appellation, was, and is known to the present day as Eastover; but in justice let it be said that some forty years prior to the period of which we are writing, quite a busy colony had existed upon this bank of the river. That, however, was before the Parliamentary troops under the command of Sir Thomas Fairfax besieged the town, and after a desperate encounter with the King's soldiers occupied Eastover. The sturdy garrison of the castle, nevertheless, still held out under their governor, Colonel Wyndham, who, in his endeavours to dislodge the enemy, ordered hot shot to be fired into the quarter they occupied, with the only result that the houses were either totally destroyed by the bombardment or by the fire caused by the cannonade, and when all was over scarcely a house was left to mark the spot where once a busy and thriving street had stood. All this destruction was to no purpose, and the Colonel, finding it useless to hold out longer, surrendered the town to the Cromwellian forces.

In spite of the forty years that had intervened, Eastover had not recovered from the effects of that disastrous siege.

Having crossed the bridge from the east, a narrow street was immediately entered. It was made narrower still by the overhanging upper storeys of the houses, and by the obstructions of the different shopkeepers whose stores were intermingled with the private dwellings occupied by the higher grade of the society of Bridgewater. Many of these houses were of a

more pretentious nature than those on the east side, even running to two storeys, and indulging in the luxury of glass windows, the diamond panes of which, however, although they admitted the light, were not absolutely of such a transparent nature as to allow a clear and uninterrupted view of the ever-changing scene without. A walk of a couple of minutes and the High Cross was reached, an octagonal building constructed of eight obtusely pointed arches springing from lateral piers with a roof supported by a single pillar, round the edge of which was an embattled parapet. This cross was used by the country folk upon market days as a gathering-place for the sale of their produce.

Having arrived at the Cross, if you turned to the left, in a few minutes you would have found yourself facing the church of St Mary, the high tower of which stood out in bold relief against the sky, dwarfing the few houses that lay scattered around it, and marking the end of the town in that direction. Proceeding further along the high road would have led you to the thriving little village of North Petherton, and continuing, to the market and county town of Taunton.

Close to the church stood the "Swan" Inn, which would probably have been noticed by the traveller, especially had he been a weary one, before the sacred edifice had attracted his attention. Now, the "Swan" in the year 1684 was a hostelry both well and badly managed, according to the views of its patrons and those of the rival establishment, the "Lamb." According to those who patronised both—and there were many who did so in those days—there was no fault to be found with the entertainment for man, and we were almost going to add, beast, but the friend of

man was quite a secondary consideration then to what he is in these enlightened times.

If you had retraced your steps to the Cross, bearing to the right and passing a few more shops and houses, the Castle Fields would have been reached, and the ruins of the Castle, partly demolished on account of its strategic strength soon after the siege of which we have spoken, would have met the gaze; but a traveller in all probability would not have chosen this direction, but would have borne a little more to the left, and not taking quite so sharp a turn would have found himself either by accident or design at the "Lamb" Inn, which, to all intents and purposes, save for a few straggling cottages, was the landmark of the western portion of the town, the high road beyond leading to the villages and hamlets nestling as it were under the protecting wing of the Quantock Hills.

A stranger might, without deviation from the truth, have declared Bridgewater to be a small and dull town at least upon four or five days out of the seven, but the particular day this chapter deals with happened to be one of those upon which the accusation of dulness would not have held good, for the town was full, or rather had been full, of life. It was but a few days to Christmas, the largest and most important market of the whole year. Country folk, both male and female, were gathered in the vicinity of the Cross, most of whom having disposed of their stock of poultry, butter, cheese, and the innumerable other items of provender they had that morning brought from the surrounding villages, were engaged in packing their empty baskets with the sundry purchases they had made in the town. Candles and lamps began to be lighted in the various shops to combat

with the fast approaching darkness; little knots of people were gathered outside the rival inns, watching the departure of their friends, or preparing to take their own; and many a cheery wish for the coming Christmas and expected glad New Year was exchanged as the different parties sped away upon their homeward course.

Others were gathered around the great log fires in the kitchens of the two inns, doubtless on account of the fast increasing darkness and cold, for a keen wind had been gradually springing up during the latter portion of the day, and the gathering clouds seemed to herald the near approach of a heavy fall of snow. These parties were discussing either the items of news brought into the town that afternoon by the stage waggon, or the business that had brought them to the Christmas market. It is hardly, however, with the group gathered round the fire at the "Lamb" with which we have to deal, but rather with its central figure, mine host, John Coombs, who is holding forth to those assembled, among whom we recognise Jack Swaine.

John Coombs is a talker (with a reservation). Once a soldier in Cromwell's army, in a company commanded by Captain, now Squire, Hewlyn of Heathercombe Manor, he had in that capacity seen more of the world than ninety-nine out of every hundred of his patrons, and it was impossible for any of the latter to plead ignorance either of his military career or of his travels after a few visits to his hostelry.

John Coombs was considered a fortunate fellow. He had given up soldiering at a very opportune moment. Returning with Captain Hewlyn from the wars to his native town, not exactly overburdened with wealth, and having no trade to fall back upon, he spent most

of his time and money, as is a soldier's wont, at an inn, the inn in this case being the "Lamb."

John Fletcher was then "mine host," "the other John" as Mistress Coombs never lost an opportunity of reminding her second husband, "different from the present John as chalk from cheese." The other John was quiet and reserved, and, fortunately for the present one, consumptive, for within three weeks of the valiant soldier's return, Mistress Fletcher was left a widow with an only child, her daughter Kate. According to the folks at the "Swan," Coombs had anticipated Fletcher's early demise, and had played his cards accordingly; but this is a scandal with which our readers need not concern themselves. Suffice it to say that after a very short period of mourning, Mistress John Fletcher became Mistress John Coombs, and John Coombs was installed, greatly to his own satisfaction, as "mine host" at the "Lamb." Therefore it is not within our province to express an opinion as to whether the man wedded the woman, or the woman the man. It was a lawful marriage, as could be proved beyond doubt by anyone who was inquisitive enough to refer to the register kept in the Church of St Mary where the ceremony took place.

What was a woman to do, argued Mistress Coombs to her sister, Mistress Swaine, with a house that had always been respectably conducted, and that every now and again was bound to have customers suffering from circumstances over which they ought to have had, but appeared not to have, any control, what was a woman to do without a man upon the premises, and a house, too, that was second to none in the town, the 'Swan" not even excepted?

So there upon this winter's evening we see John Coombs installed in the most comfortable seat by his

own fireside. Upon a small table at his elbow stands a leathern mug filled with the county drink of cider. Surrounded by an admiring crowd, he is laying down his views upon politics, fashion, and morals. He looks every inch a typical landlord as he sits there, ruddy-faced, fat, and complacent, and drains his mug to the dregs, a feat that he has accomplished more than once in the afternoon during a lengthy harangue upon periwigs, walking-canes, and corsets, as seen by him some years ago in the court-yard of St James' Palace.

John, as we have before remarked, is a talker with a reservation, the reservation developing strongly towards evening, when he is generally in the habit of getting very sleepy, a not uncommon occurrence with many folks when the time for their night's rest is approaching; but with John Coombs, little exhibitions of sulkiness heralded the arrival of the god of sleep some hours before that worthy should have been due, and when once the fit was upon him, all the King's horses and all Cromwell's men would have found it a hard task to drag Coombs from the arms of Morpheus.

"Jack," said Mistress Coombs addressing Swaine, "where is t' maister?" and at the same moment catching sight of her spouse, she said, in an authoritative voice, seeming to imply, "Disobey me if you dare, you wretch":—"Jan, zome vurriner du zay as 'e come from Lunnon town, zo hurry thee oop and 'tend upon 'un."

John arose in haste, as was his usual custom, to obey the behest of his better-half, or to make a pretence of doing so at all events. If called upon at a sufficiently early hour of the evening, he was always particularly spry and active, but should the summons happen to come at a later period, when the innumerable cups of sack or cider with which he was wont to quench an apparently insatiable thirst had given him an amount

of courage evidently dormant at other times, he would assume the attitude of defiance at which even he himself felt astonished when the effect had passed off, leaving him a sadder and a wiser man, trembling in anticipation of the inevitable interview with the loving, but strong-minded woman of his choice.

"Haste an' show 'un t' best room, vor Squire Hewlyn be in a mortal hurry t' go, vor he zay that 'e be aveared 't 'ull snow avore 'e reaches 'ome; an' Jack," continued the hostess, addressing Swaine, "'ll ride wi' un an' carry the basket vor muther an' Kate, zo go get 'ee the horses roun'."

Jack obeyed his aunt with the same amount of promptitude as shown by his law-made uncle, and disappeared through the doorway before she had time to return to the Squire, who was awaiting her in the private parlour of the inn.

The Squire, whilst fortifying the inner man with some hot spiced ale against his none too promising ride home, was interrupted by the appearance of mine host, who, to give him his due, had upon this occasion carried out his instructions with a considerable amount of promptitude. He now appeared at the parlour door, redder in the face than usual, and out of breath as he exclaimed:

"Squire, there be a gentleman upstairs as gives the name of Captain Annersley and prays to zee thee; he further stated as to-morrow he does intend to ride over to the Manor. I did then inform him, Squire, as you had not made knowed to me your expectations of a guest, and zo I told him not that you did tarry here, not knowing——"

Squire Hewlyn did not wait for the landlord to conclude his remarks, but hastily brushing past him, ascended the staircase at a pace that would have done

credit to a younger man, leaving Coombs gaping in astonishment at what he considered the Squire's unceremonious behaviour.

"Captain Annersley? Why that be the Squire's gods'n," said Mistress Coombs when she heard who the stranger was.

"Squire's godson," repeated Coombs, with an injured air, "why Squire ne'er told me of any godson."

"'Ee doan't expect Squire to tell 'ee everythin' vor 'ee to go a-tittle-tattling, do 'ee," answered the woman sharply.

"Why did 'e tell thee then?" retorted the man, but Mistress Coombs, not noticing, or feigning not to notice the cutting allusion to herself, continued: "Why, didn't I know the young Maister times gone by, when 'e an' Mistress Grace was boy and girl together. Why, last time 'e goo to stay wi' Squire were after you married me."

"After you married me," said John as solemnly as if he had made a grand discovery. "Thee never told me that."

"Me'be I did, me'be I didn't," answered his wife quickly, and then followed what may be described as "a few words," over which it would be better to draw the curtain. Suffice it to say it ended as all such arguments generally do end where a sharp-tongued woman is concerned—in the utter discomfiture and rout of the man.

"I doubt not but my good horse will carry me that far," said the gentleman who had been the innocent cause of the scene above narrated. This remark was made after a most cordial greeting had taken place between the Squire and his godson, and in answer to the former's pressing invitation that Annersley should proceed to the Manor that night.

"My wife and Grace will be overjoyed to see you, dear lad," said the old man, placing his hand affectionately upon the younger's shoulder, "and their surprise will be even as great as my own, for in truth I hardly expected to cast eyes upon you for this fourteen days or more. Now I pray, as soon as it pleases you, we will make a start for home, for the roads are mighty bad, and I much fear 'twill snow ere many hours have flown. So come below to the parlour of our good host Coombs, there shall we find some hot spiced ale to brace us up withal."

"Tell me, sir," said Annersley, "that red-faced man whom I saw but a short time since, was that mine host?"

"Even so," replied the Squire. "You surprise me much that he should not have informed you of that fact, for to do so to strangers is always his first care."

"Eh, but I rather fancy that I took him a bit aback in showing that I was no stranger by inquiring after you. Forsooth, I met him with the question ere he had time to speak, and as soon as I informed him of my name, he repeated it again and again to himself, reminding me for all the world of an old cow as she chews the cud. Then I fancy he must have remembered my name and thought it one of ill repute, and so to give him cause for thought and to hasten him, by way of jest, I placed my hand upon my sword, and in a loud voice commanded him to answer me, whereupon he left the room like a shot from the cannon's mouth, and, as you are aware, I was full of merriment when you entered," concluded Annersley, laughing.

"I fear that by your jest you may have offended the good man beyond recall," said the Squire, "but let us repair below; you must be both hungry and cold. You will then have opportunity to make amends for your behaviour."

So arm and arm the pair descended the stairs and were soon snugly settled in the private parlour, the young man taking the first opportunity of making peace with John Coombs, who, to do him justice, was not averse to avoiding the subject, while Annersley, seeing which way the land lay, made no reference to it whatever.

The Squire, who was all impatience to make a start for home, inquired more than once if the horses were ready, and Annersley noticing this anxiety soon arose, and almost immediately Coombs announced that the animals were at the door. With a hearty shake of the hand, and profuse thanks to the landlord and his lady for their hospitality, he followed the Squire along the flagged passage into the street where the horses were being held in readiness for their departure, surrounded by an admiring crowd to witness so uncommon a sight as three quadrupeds saddled and bridled at one time in the streets of Bridgewater.

The Squire, assisted by Swaine, mounted his horse, and bade a cheery "good-night," but the younger man, with a spring, evidently the outcome of long practice, vaulted lightly into his saddle, and the pair trotted off up the street followed closely by Swaine, and were soon upon the high road towards home.

It was not until they had ridden a mile, and had passed through the hamlet of Wembdon, that the riders drew rein at the foot of a steep hill to the west of the town. The younger man was the first to break the silence.

"That, sir," said he indicating Swaine with his whip, "is your servant, I trow!"

"Indeed, no," answered the Squire, "'tis my good tenant, John Swaine of Ashton Mill."

"Swaine, Swaine," replied Annersley, "I should have

reckoned now that he would be a man more advanced in years, but still in this dim light I may have been deceived; yet it seems to me that he was in the prime of life when I last saw him, which must be full fifteen years ago."

"That," said the Squire, "was the father of this lad, and he has been dead now for some six years; but I, knowing him full well for an honest, hard-working boy, consented to his carrying on the mill for his poor widowed mother."

"Then, forsooth, this must be the self-same Jack Swaine who instructed Grace and myself in the art of catching eels in the pond just by the wheel house, and beat us both at tickling trout, and once gave me a trouncing in a fair stand-up fight to boot."

"The very same, you poaching rogue," said the Squire as he recalled the latter incident. "Eh! and the lad has grown into as fine and strapping a man as there is in the whole county of Somerset, and none for strength and courage can be found to equal him; no, not even Devon can produce his match, and I warn you, Master Hubert, should you desire to try conclusions with him, I swear you would find him a harder nut to crack than even in days of yore."

"From what you tell me," replied Annersley laughing, "in a case such as this discretion is indeed the better part of valour, and so to make peace with this young Hercules without more ado," saying which the Captain pulled up his horse just as the brow of the hill was reached.

"Well, Sir Jack, I fear you do not remember me," said Annersley in a friendly voice.

"Ah! but I do, zir," answered Swaine respectfully, "'ee are much changed zince I seed 'ee last, but I knowed 'ee, zir, in spite o' that."

"Do you call to mind the trout-tickling, Jack, and the trouncing you gave me?"

"I mind me the trout, zir."

"And the trouncing, Jack?"

"I mind we had a bit of a vall out, zir."

"But surely the trouncing, you remember that?"

Swaine did not care to give a direct answer, but met the question by saying:

"I mind going with mother t' great house to axe your pardon, zir."

"Ah!" laughed the other, "I remember. 'Twas your turn to weep, and my revenge came in seeing you rub your eyes and blubber. Then I remember the good Squire read us a lecture, and when he heard 'twas I who struck you first, said I had well merited what I got."

"Ees, zir, I mind that, vor I could not have faced t' Squire, but that mother 'ood take me to t' house."

The conversation was here interrupted by the Squire calling out:—

"Hurry thee up, lads, hurry thee up," and there was some ground for the reminder, for the few isolated flakes of snow that had been descending at intervals ever since the party started upon their homeward journey, were now falling more thickly and regularly and it was not long before the travellers found themselves in the midst of a blinding snowstorm that soon covered both horses and riders with a fair, white mantle. The dark outline of the Quantock Hills, which had looked but a few moments before like a bank of cloud in the settling gloom, as soon as the higher ground had been reached could no longer be discerned, not even by the most vivid imagination, and the journey became one of difficulty, attended by no small amount of danger to the riders.

Jack Swaine now led the way, closely followed by

his two companions, and a complete silence was almost forced upon the three. It was only broken at intervals by a question from the Squire to Swaine as to their whereabouts.

Squire Hewlyn did not altogether regret this enforced silence, for it allowed his thoughts to wander back to the time when the young man at his side was but an infant in arms, the child of one whom his wife knew full well had preferred another to himself, and who within a year after her baby was born was left a widow. How well he remembered the child's father, his fellow-soldier and his rival, but a good comrade for all that, a man that nothing could daunt however great the obstacle in his path might be. Then he called to mind how this self-same man had attempted a somewhat foolish reconnoitre before an engagement of the forces in the Civil War, and being surprised by the enemy, was overpowered, cut down, and literally hacked to pieces by the Royalist troops. Then had it fallen to the lot of the Squire to fulfil the painful task of breaking the sad news of her husband's death to the widow, and she, poor soul, never recovered the shock, and survived the valiant soldier but a few short months. Then the infant passed from childhood to boyhood, and he recalled many of the incidents that took place during this period and his long stay at Heathercombe Manor, and, among others, that with Jack Swaine to which Annersley had just alluded. A tinge of regret came over him as he remembered that it was at his instigation the boy had been brought up and educated in London, leading to his ultimately becoming entangled (so at least it was said) in the schemes of the Duke of Monmouth, and he reproached himself for not having taken more care and looked more

closely after the lad. He had heard how his godson had followed the Duke into exile; occasionally scraps of news came to him, but nothing of any importance, save that Annersley was alive and well, and no further tidings until he had received his last letter saying that he would shortly visit him. The postscript to the letter: "Do not mention my visit to any friends in London," seemed to contain some hidden meaning. Was it not the talk that very day at Bridgewater that the party hostile to the Duke of York were moving again to assert the legitimacy of Monmouth, and that Monmouth himself was becoming daily more than ever a favourite with his royal father? Something told him, but he could not discover exactly what, that this young man had some ulterior object other than a visit of simple friendship. "But there," the Squire said to himself, "I am glad to see the lad, glad to see him."

Annersley was quite unconscious of the uneasiness he was causing his godfather. He, too, was thinking of the changes that had taken place during his absence and of the difference he would see in Mistress Hewlyn and Grace, his little playmate Grace, whom he had teased sometimes so as to cause her tears to flow; but they had been good friends always. She was now engaged, or next door to it, so the Squire had informed him, and would in all probability soon be married. Had she grown into a pretty woman? He could hardly imagine anything else. Then again the very fact that she was to be married appeared to corroborate his surmises. She might be plain, but whenever he had thought of this little country maid it was as he remembered her, and he wondered to himself whether she had yet learnt the manners of the ladies of the Court. He sincerely trusted not,

from the experience he had had of them during his sojourn with Monmouth, he felt that even if she were plain he would infinitely prefer her simple and modest ways to the blandishments of the beauties whose arts had up to the present time found him invulnerable. He supposed, though, that he would return and fall a prey, perhaps unwilling or otherwise, to some miss more designing or fascinating than others of her sex; or perhaps he was destined to be a wanderer all the days of his life, as he had been during the last few years, an existence of which he was already becoming heartily weary.

Swaine had all his work cut out to keep his horse in the centre of the track, for the hedges and trees, the only landmarks, were fast losing their identity and were being transformed by the heavy snow. But he thought of his cousin, Kate Fletcher, and how she would accept the Christmas gift that he had brought her from Bridgewater, and his heart beat fast with pleasure as he anticipated hers.

"We have passed the Mill, zir," at last said Swaine.

"We might pass the devil himself in a storm like this," said the Squire.

"I fancy it is a trifle too cold for that good gentleman to be abroad," remarked Annersley laughing.

"Home at last," said the Squire a few moments later as the horses passed through the gates that had been considerately left open. The lights from the Manor House were now distinctly visible through the fitful flights of the storm, and just as the riders drew rein the heavy oaken doors were swung open, letting out a flood of warm light upon the weather-beaten travellers, and making them feel by contrast the full nature of the risk through which, they inwardly thanked God, they had safely passed.

CHAPTER FOURTH

ANNERSLEY DISCLOSES HIS MISSION

AFTER having partaken of his mid-day meal, Squire Hewlyn sat in his library, contentedly puffing the pipe of peace. The Squire, like most country gentlemen, was a hearty eater, and frequently put his gastronomic abilities to a severe test, but although advanced in years, his digestive organs remained unimpaired, and he was always ready to make a good meal off almost anything edible that might be placed before him, and, what is more, heartily to enjoy it. He was a man whom it was a pleasure to see seated at your table, so thoroughly did he appreciate the good things of this world. He was also fond of his glass of wine, and knew a good one, too; a "one-bottle-man" would aptly describe him, for his glass had its limitations and constituted both the maximum and minimum of his consumption of alcoholic liquor—save on very rare and special occasions when minimum stood for one and added to maximum made two, on the whole a moderation, that, had his custom been more generally emulated than it was in those days of excess, might have proved beneficial to the livers of succeeding generations. However, as we have said before, there sat the Squire, puffing away at his pipe, and feeling thoroughly satisfied with everybody and everything, and himself in particular.

An open book lay upon his knee, not that he was engaged in studying it, but that he liked to fancy that its contents were occupying his mind. In reality, he was thinking of his godson, whose stay at the Manor had rejoiced the old man's heart, and cemented, if possible, more strongly than ever, the affection that existed between the two.

Up to the present time, Annersley had breathed no word of the business that had brought him back to the land of his birth, and the Squire was just wondering to himself what the nature of his godson's mission might be, when the door opened, and the subject of his thoughts entered, breathless and mud bespattered from his ride into Bridgewater.

The Squire noticed that Annersley, who, as a rule, was one of the calmest and coolest of mortals, appeared unwontedly agitated; his face was flushed and his eyes sparkled as he came up and grasped the old man by the hand.

"The news, Squire, the news, have you heard it?" said he, excitedly. "His Majesty King Charles is dead; he died but three days ago."

"Dead!" exclaimed the Squire, in astonishment, "is this true news you bring? From whence did your information come, lad?"

"From the best of sources," replied Annersley; "I had it from a gallant who was at Whitehall when His Majesty passed away."

"Sit thee down, Hubert, and tell me all you know," said Squire Hewlyn, now thoroughly interested, as he refilled his pipe, and settled himself comfortably in his chair.

"It appears," Annersley commenced, "from what my informant told me, that His Majesty was first perceived to be unwell a week ago last Sunday. The

Court was as usual crowded with gallants, who had come to bask in their royal master's sunshine, perhaps to enjoy his hospitality, but probably to gamble for his money and that of his friends. The King, so my informant went on to say, sat chatting merrily away to his two favourites, the Duchesses of Cleveland and Portsmouth, and the Court altogether presented a scene that shocked the more righteous of His Majesty's subjects and caused them to withdraw rather than witness the Sabbath desecrated. Later on in the day, just before the arrival of supper, the King complained of not feeling well, and being unable to touch any of the dainties set out to tempt his appetite, he bade adieu to his guests and retired, to pass, so it is said, a restless night.

"On the following morning when he rose, it was noticed, by those whose habit it was to pay their calls during the time the King's toilet was being made, that His Majesty looked very sadly indeed, and they were one and all horrified when, in attempting to rise from his seat, he fell back insensible into the arms of one of his courtiers. Doctors were hurriedly summoned from all parts, and each in turn prescribed his remedy; but none seemed to know the exact nature of the malady from which the royal patient was suffering. Subsequently, however, he rallied slightly, and the news being made public, the church bells rang out a joyful peal, and preparations were made to illuminate the city in honour of the joyful event; but," Annersley continued excitedly, "the bonfires were never lighted as the rally was but a temporary one. In a few days a relapse took place, and upon the next day, that is last Friday, King Charles, after a great deal of suffering, passed quietly and peacefully away."

the vield you were zo good as to zay I might have the use of, and that if zo be you have no objection, Squire, I will turn out my colts into it next wick. But, zir, you must 'low me to pay rent for use of it," wound up Swaine, looking on the ground, and moving uncomfortably in his seat.

"Tut, tut, John," answered the Squire with a wave of his hand; "time enough to settle that when the day comes round." Which really meant the use of that meadow would not cost our friend John a single groat.

"I thank 'ee much, zir; you're good to me as you always have been," said Swaine, rising to go.

"Hast heard the news, man?" Annersley asked.

"What news, zir?" Swaine queried. "Do 'ee mean that Widow Cottle's ould zow died last night, or that Zarah Clitsome is to wed young Jan Shute in May?"

"No, by gad!" replied Annersley, laughing, "my news is not so important as thine, for it has naught to do either with a sow or a wedding. 'Tis simply that the King is dead!"

"The King is dead!" repeated Swaine excitedly. "And when did he die, zir, if I may make zo bold as to ask?"

"But three days ago," answered Annersley.

"Dree days ago," murmured Swaine to himself, "dree days ago," he repeated as if in deep thought, and then suddenly he asked: "And does his Grace of Monmouth come to the throne?"

"That is difficult to say at the present moment," replied his informant; "but what do you know of his Grace?"

"A great deal," interposed the Squire, "for our good friend John was one of his most ardent followers, when some four years ago the Duke made his progress through the county."

"I prithee tell me all about that time," Annersley

asked Swaine, becoming interested, and wishing to draw him out.

"I remember it like yesterday," began John after a little deliberation, "vor I took holiday to vollow his Grace vrom place to place. Virst of all, I mounted my best mare, and taking zome food along wi' me and zome money to spend on the way, I rode to Ilchester. 'Twas in August, and grand weather we had. As I journeyed I was joined on the road by many other horsemen, all bound on the zelfzame errand, and they du zay when the great Duke came there was more 'an tu thousand mounted men to voller him. All along the roads were lined with men, women and children, who strewed his path with flowers and leaves and blessed him as he rode by. Then when we arrived at Squire Speke's, the Duke's vollowers on foot and on horseback did stretch along the road vor miles an' miles, and zome du zay twenty thousand zouls were gathered in the park. Zo many people there were, zir, that they had to pull down the pales that they might enter, vor Squire Speke had given orders vor all to be admitted. It was a grand zight, zir," continued Swaine, usually a silent man in the presence of his superiors, but becoming eloquent now as he proceeded with his narrative, "a great zight to zee that congregation of zouls all zeated on the zward; I shall never forget it. The great Duke was there," and in his excitement poor John indicated the Squire with his forefinger, "and his vriends all zitting beneath the shade of as vine an old chestnut tree as ever you cast eyes on, zir, and they were being zerved with all kinds of meats, and cakes, and wines that sparkled like the water in the mill-stream, and us was not vorgotten, for zider was zerved, bread, cheese, and other vood to us all. Then his Grace rose and spoke, and zaid how much he velt the kind-

ness of the people, and how many vriends he had in dear old Zummerzet, and a lot more that I have no remembrance of now; and when he had vinished, every zoul there rose up and cheered him, shouting: 'Long live King Charles and the Protestant Duke!'

"There did I bide the night long of old Jan Collard, and many thousands did sleep in the park in the open air. In the morning I rose and zaddled my mare, and vollowed the Duke to Sir John Sydenham's at Brimpton House. Again all the way along the roads were lined with volks cheering his Grace, and how handsome he looked as he rode along, bowing and smiling to the people—every inch vit to be a King," John continued with increasing animation. "At Brimpton—let me zee—I did stay the night with Roger Mallack, and right welcome did he make me. Next day we march to Barrington, where Squire Stroud did entertain the Duke, and they du zay when he arrived he had as many as vive thousand horsemen with him. Never avore or zince did I clap eyes on zo many horsemen. That night he slept at Chard at the house of another great gentleman, and I with Master Zamuel Aplin.

"Next day we did journey to Ilminster, and then to White Lackington, where we lay for the night, and on Zunday his Grace went to Ilminster Church which the people had decorated with leaves and flowers. Whilst his Grace was in the church, those that could not vind zeats inzide did stay outside in the churchyard, where a zervice was held.

"On Monday," continued Swaine, who now spoke of himself as if he had been attached to the Duke's party, "to Colyton, and then on to Master Duke's at Otterton. Then his Grace did make his way to Exeter, and I to my home from which I had been absent vor a wick; but I shall never regret those

days, never. That was a grand time," he concluded, quite out of breath, and having made the longest speech of his life.

"Bravo, Sir John," said Annersley, rising and clapping the young giant on the back; "bravely told, my friend. And so you are an admirer of his Grace of Monmouth?"

"Indeed I be, zir," came the answer without hesitation.

"Yes; I believe our friend will never forget that week, nor the cider, eh, John?" said the Squire, appealing to Swaine.

"That I shall not, Squire. But I must be going," he continued, now itching to be the first to impart the news of the King's death to his friends, "and thank 'ee, zir, for your kindness about the vield."

"Say no more, lad, say no more," interrupted the Squire, shaking hands; "God speed you."

"And good luck too," chimed in Annersley, filled with the fire of an enthusiasm that has carried many a less deserving cause to a triumphant issue, an enthusiasm certainly not damped by Swaine's glowing narrative. "God bless the Prince our future King, Jack," he added.

Swaine stopped as he was about to leave the room, and said, "But you zed, zir, there were doubts that he would be our King."

"Yes, Jack, so there are," answered Annersley; "let it be known that James is King."

"And not the Duke?" queried Swaine, with a puzzled look on his honest face.

"No, Jack; not the Duke, do you understand?"

"Yes, zir, I do," answered Swaine. "God bless the Protestant Duke," he added, as he was leaving the room.

"I told you that that was an honest fellow," said the Squire when Swaine was gone.

"And as true as steel, I'll be bound," returned Annersley as he left the room, thinking to himself that the time might come when this man's service would be of the utmost value to him. Should that day arrive, he felt sure that the Duke of Monmouth would have no stauncher or sturdier follower than this honest young Somerset giant.

CHAPTER FIFTH

A SECRET MEETING

THE first half of February '85 had well-nigh run its course, and still found Hubert Annersley a welcome visitor at the Manor. Nor did that gentleman show the least anxiety to take his departure from beneath its hospitable roof, knowing full well that his kindly host and hostess would not have raised the slightest objection had he thought fit to propose taking up his permanent abode at Heathercombe. Sir Mark Noble was a constant, if not a daily, visitor, and he had upon more than one occasion endeavoured in a roundabout way to ascertain the probable length of the visit of the man whom he now looked upon in the light of a formidable rival; but he had met with so little encouragement from Annersley whenever he had broached the subject, that at length, in sheer despair, he felt bound to give up all attempts to satisfy his curiosity in that quarter. Although both men showed a marked courtesy towards one another, and were to all outward intents and purposes the very best of friends, yet there was a something that came between them that led to a certain amount of constraint when in one another's company. Each seemed to divine the other's thoughts, and consequently they acted as two diplomatists apparently bent upon negotiating for peace, when in reality both were for war, and war to the knife.

Grace, the innocent cause of these hostile intentions, so far from pouring oil upon the troubled waters, merely added fuel to the already fast-kindling fire in both the rivals' breasts; for did she not laugh with each in turn, and sing their favourite songs to the accompaniment of her spinet, thus unwittingly fanning the spark of jealousy until it bid fair at any moment to burst into flame?

The rains of February had dispersed the snow that had all through the previous weeks lain heavily in the valleys and upon the hills, and the month for once in a way promised to fulfil the prophesy of the meteorologists who stick staunchly to the old proverb of February fill-dyke, which runs:

> "February fill-dyke
> Be it black, or be it white:
> But if it be white,
> It's the better to like."

The rain had fallen continually for some days past, until at length the leaden clouds overhead, tired of the incessant downpour, refused, for the time being at all events, to give forth a further supply of moisture.

The dark clouds scud quickly along, and when they do occasionally part company, disclose the pale-greyish blue of the firmament above, making one feel that although winter has taken its departure, spring has not yet nearly come to shed its gentle influence on the earth.

Animal life, apparently dormant during the greater part of the winter, begins to stir; the birds seek their mates in anticipation of the nesting season; the little water vole is seen bestirring himself; the hoarse croak of the frog is heard upon all sides; the gentle ringdove commences its cooing, whilst the song of the skylark, that herald of spring, gladdens the heart of man,

and arouses a feeling of thankfulness in his breast that winter has flown, releasing Nature to cast her benefits abroad.

Along a path, little used in winter, but which in summer served as a short-cut through the fields from Ashton Mill to the high road leading to Heathercombe, walked Sir Mark. From his behaviour one might have been led to suppose that he was engaged upon sentry duty, as for nearly an hour past he had been marching up and down that path to a certain spot, and then retracing his steps to the starting-point, until the unoffending ground upon which he trod might have justly complained, had it not been for the mud, of the unnecessary amount of friction to which it was being subjected.

It was not, however, from Nature that the complaining came, but from the individual who, at each successive turn, viewed with increased annoyance the mud-bespattered condition of his immaculate hose, until at length the fast-failing light abated his misery —in that direction at all events.

What could a courtly gallant of Sir Mark Noble's description be doing at that time of day marching up and down a muddy and out-of-the-way path in a deserted field? That he was there upon some specific errand might be gathered from the disjointed sentences that every now and again escaped his lips as he tramped backwards and forwards.

"By gad, but methinks I must have missed the wench," he muttered; "yet I did tell her on no account to leave the Manor until dusk had well set in. Afraid to come this way in the dark, mayhap," he continued with a sneer, "or gone by the road, curse my luck."

Once again he resumed his march, until he suddenly

stopped and listened. Surely somebody was coming. Yes; he distinctly detected footsteps; there was no mistake this time. He was correct in his surmise, for almost immediately a small grey figure came into sight, hurrying through the fast-gathering gloom in his direction. He smiled to himself, a self-satisfied smile, for he knew that his weary waiting had not been in vain. In another instant the little grey figure was clasped in his strong embrace; he felt the fluttering heart beating against his breast as he pressed kisses upon Kate Fletcher's willing, upturned little face.

"Oh, Mark dear, I am so frightened," she panted, "it was so dark," and she clung closer to her lover for protection.

"But you are not frightened now, child, are you?" said Sir Mark soothingly, as he smoothed the profusion of dark hair that the wind and her hasty retreat had disordered.

"No, not now, dear," she answered, as she lifted her face confidingly to his, and felt herself safe in his arms. The dove had found a resting-place after her weary flight. "The hedges looked so black, Mark," she continued, "and when I ran I felt sure I heard footsteps pursuing me," and she shivered at the mere remembrance. "You don't think anyone was following me, do you, dearest?"

"You pretty little goose, no. It was but an echo," answered Sir Mark, reassuringly.

"Do you really think me pretty, Mark?" said the girl coquettishly; "I should be, oh! so happy if I thought you did."

"Pretty, my little pet? Of course I do," answered her lover. "Tell me, did you see Mistress Grace at the Manor to-day?"

"Yes, and I am to go to her next week. Now

don't you love her just a tiny wee bit?" said the girl archly, looking into her lover's face to see the effect her words had upon him.

"I have told you before, you silly child," replied Sir Mark in an irritable tone, "I am but polite to Mistress Grace as becomes a gentleman to a lady in her station. Remember we are close neighbours, and my estate joins the Squire's, so 'tis but policy upon my part to be on friendly terms with each member of his family."

"I am so glad," sighed Kate, "for when I do hear the servants and my cousin Jack say that you will one day wed her, it make me feel so miserable and unhappy. Then I try not to be so, and think of all your promises to me; but somehow I don't feel any the happier unless you are at my side to say them all over again," concluded the poor little girl, unable to restrain her tears any longer.

"Nonsense! you know they lie—say they lie," said Sir Mark fiercely.

"Yes, yes, I know it, dear one," sobbed Kate; "but sometimes my silly heart will fail me when I think of my handsome lover," she went on, looking admiringly into his face, "a gentleman, liking me better than beautiful Mistress Grace. For she is beautiful. Jack says so, everybody says so."

"Eh, but not so beautiful as thou art, my pet," answered he, patting her face; "besides, what should your rough cousin Jack know of beauty?" he added scornfully.

"He is the only one, besides yourself, that calls me pretty," said Kate naïvely.

"And what more does the clown say?" exclaimed Sir Mark sharply, a jealous qualm passing over him. "Would Jack Swaine marry you? eh? tell me that?"

Most women would have been quick to seize such an opportunity of arousing jealousy in a lover's breast, but poor little Kate was quite unversed in the arts of coquetry. Indeed her heart was far too much bound up in this man to leave room for so much as even a thought for another. She belonged body and soul to her handsome lover, but, judging her from his own standpoint, his suspicions were aroused, and made him repeat his question over again.

"He has never asked me himself, sir," said Kate humbly, "but Aunt Swaine does say that it is his wish so to do."

"And what said you, girl?" questioned Sir Mark.

"That I was not good enough for him," answered Kate innocently.

Sir Mark laughed at the unintentional disparagement of himself, and the girl, not knowing the cause of his merriment, added:

"How could I say aught else, knowing I was to be your wife? But tell me, Mark dear, are we for ever to meet in this way? I do hate it so," she said petulantly.

Sir Mark winced visibly, and for a few minutes the heinousness of his crime arose in all its force before him. It was, however, but a momentary struggle with his better self. Kate's face was close to his; her large dark eyes were looking pleadingly up at him; he felt her breath upon his cheek; the throbbing of her heart against his breast; and his better nature was vanquished. He cast his conscience to the winds; the devil had triumphed once again; his lips met hers, and they clasped one another in one long, lingering embrace. What would the world's verdict be on this man's conduct? what indeed?

"When shall I see you again?" said Sir Mark, releasing her blushing from his embrace, and ignoring her last question. "Of course I shall see more of you when you are at the Manor; indeed I shall come often that I may get a glimpse of your sweet face, but meetings will be few and far between."

"Few," repeated Kate sadly; "oh, Mark dearest, promise me," said she, clasping his arm and lifting her face pleadingly to his, "promise me that you will speak to me whenever occasion does arise."

"I will promise, my little one," answered Sir Mark, "if you will not let aught you see or hear trouble your sweet head; for remember always that Mistress Grace and I must ever be good friends, and keep so for policy's sake." But no promise was given on either side as he kissed her once again.

"I must go now, sir," said Kate reluctantly. "I should have been at home an hour gone and more. Jack will be sure to go along the road to meet me, and oh! if he should get to the Manor," she whispered fearfully.

Sir Mark seeing the look of terror on her face, said: "Perhaps you are right, little one. Now mind what I say, and don't be troubling your pretty head about what you hear of me. Remember always what I have told you."

The girl, tearing herself from her lover's arms, bounded off like a frightened deer, and was soon lost to sight in the darkness. Sir Mark stood for a few moments wrapped in thought, gazing in the direction in which the girl had disappeared, until he was awakened from his reverie by the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. He had barely time to conceal himself behind a neighbouring hedge, just off the beaten track, and to congratulate himself that

Kate had such a good start, when the figure of a man strode quickly past, and as he parted the brambles in order to get a glimpse of the hurrying figure, his start of surprise and exclamation of "Annersley, by gad!" were nearly the means of disclosing his presence. After the footsteps had died away in the distance and he felt it safe, he emerged from his hiding-place with a sigh of relief, and in a few moments set off at a brisk pace in the direction of Stow Hall.

As he walked along, he wondered to himself what in the world that man's business could be away from the Manor at this time of the day. Surely his were not the footsteps Kate imagined were dogging hers? His heart almost leapt into his mouth at the bare idea, though he said to himself that it was nonsense to imagine such a thing. But still this man's presence caused him far more uneasiness than he cared to own. He must be more careful in the future, he decided. If need be, he would forego these romantic meetings rather than give Annersley an advantage that he felt sure he would be only too ready to make use of to aid his purpose. No; the thing was too risky, and he must at all hazards see that Kate's stay at the Manor was of short duration. It would be unsafe for her to remain there long, he felt certain, besides the danger of courting the Squire's daughter and carrying on an intrigue with her maid under the same roof. "Why," he asked himself, "is this girl of all others chosen by Grace? Undoubtedly, there are plenty much more suitable than she, an innkeeper's daughter, a girl of no experience. She must simply have been engaged for no other purpose than to upset my private plans," thought he irritably as he walked along, invoking aid both from above and below. If he had only thought for a moment

he might have saved himself the trouble in the former direction, by remembering that the spiritual beings to whom he was appealing never upon any occasion work in double harness. Of one thing, however, he was certain; namely, that the sooner he could find a way of getting Kate out of the neighbourhood the better it would be for his peace of mind. How to accomplish this was the rub, and when the great door of the Hall was opened by the old butler to admit his mud-bespattered young master, this vexing problem was as far off being solved as ever.

CHAPTER SIXTH

MOTHER AND SON

IN front of a huge, blazing fire burning in the ancient banqueting-hall, the lord and master of Stow lounged in a picturesque attitude, watching his old servant Simon removing the remains of the repast he had partaken of, rather later than was his usual wont, after returning from the meeting with Kate Fletcher.

The wind that had risen during the last hour sighed and moaned in the open chimney. Outside, it kept up a low, wailing sound, rising at intervals into a crescendo more perfect than any manipulation of the organ-swell could produce, and seeming as if the earth itself had opened to give vent to the pent-up agony of the troubled spirits below. Then as it gradually closed, the low moan that followed seemed but a memory of that heartrending cry. The log fire served the double purpose of giving light as well as heat, for in other respects the hall was badly lighted. Certainly a few refined tallow candles burned in silver holders upon the oaken table in the centre of the room, but their feeble, flickering light only assisted to give a weird aspect to the apartment.

The old servant Simon, or Simon Bartlett, to give him his full title, is deserving of more than a passing comment. He had grown almost white in the service of the Noble family. As a mere lad, he had been employed about the estate by the present owner's

grandsire, whilst Sir Mark's father had taken him on as a personal and confidential servant. After his master's death, and during the whole of young Mark's childhood, he had acted in a similar capacity to the boy's mother, and well and faithfully had he carried out his trust. If little Mark fell, Simon always appeared upon the scene in some miraculous manner, picked him up, soothed him, and attended to his childish hurts. Now, as could be seen by the way he was removing the evening meal, he was getting old; he did not move as quickly as in days of yore; but still time, as he was forced to admit, had been kind to him. He lived but to serve his mistress, and next to her his young master, though it was doubtful whether the latter fully appreciated the old man's sterling worth.

Simon, as he slowly snuffed the candles before taking his departure, was the first to break the silence.

"My lady begged me to ask you when she could speak with you before you retired, sir; shall I inform her now?" he queried.

"Anything particularly the matter, Simon?" asked Sir Mark carelessly.

Simon turned his back to his young master as he made a pretence of putting some small ornament in its place, and replied:

"No, sir, not that I know of; but I was to be sure and tell my mistress when you could see her."

"Very well, Simon; tell my mother I shall be pleased to see her now," rejoined Sir Mark; and the old retainer shuffled away to do his master's bidding.

It could not be said that Sir Mark was an undutiful son, yet he was obliged to own that he looked upon these special interviews with a certain amount of aversion, as they generally involved a serious talk,

not always altogether deserved, upon some little failing in his character. But what else could be expected of his mother, situated as she had been, knowing what she knew, when her husband had been brought home dead upon that fateful day?

She would willingly have died, too; but God in His mercy had taken one life to give another, and when that life proved to be a baby boy, the mother's lips moved in silent prayer that she might be spared to bring up her son, his child, free from the vices of the father, that his name might be handed down to another generation, and that Stow Hall might yet echo with the voices of her grandchildren.

To-night, Sir Mark wondered, as he stood with his eyes fixed upon the door through which he knew his mother must enter, what was the especial sin he was to be called to account for.

The rustling of a silk gown heralded the approach of Lady Malda Noble, and her son at once gathered from the expression upon her face that this was to be no ordinary interview. Even when she came to his side and kissed him affectionately, his surmises upon that score were not dispelled.

"Have you seen Grace to-day, Mark?" she began.

"Yes, mother; in fact, I came straight here from the Manor," he replied.

"And have you yet arranged anything with the Squire, Mark, with regard to your marriage?" she asked anxiously.

"No, mother dear," he answered; "as yet I have had no word with the Squire upon the subject, for, thanks to your having conveyed to Mistress Hewlyn my feelings towards her fair daughter, I think he quite understands the position, and so does Grace."

"Yes, Mark, no doubt," said Lady Malda; "but you

promised me you would press the subject of your marriage without further delay. If you hesitate, you may find that you have not Grace's affections entirely to yourself; not that I think for a moment that she could prefer any other lover to my handsome boy," added his mother in a tone of pride, looking affectionately at him. "Still, be warned in time; delays are, and ever were, dangerous, my son."

"What do you mean, mother?" said Sir Mark irritably. "Do you think this Captain Annersley will supplant me?"

"I don't know that Captain Annersley in particular would do so, but I meant any man."

"Really, mother, I do not understand you," he replied with increased irritation. "Grace is still young, and, I am sure, in no hurry to wed, even though it be your son."

"Mark, Mark," said Lady Malda sadly, "remember there was a barrier to this marriage. That barrier, as you are aware, has been removed; but had I not known the character of Grace Hewlyn, the holy life she leads, her chastity and modesty, and the deep, affectionate nature of her disposition, do you think I should have used my influence to remove it? Oh, Mark, trust a mother's instincts; Grace will make you a good and faithful wife."

"My dearest mother," replied Sir Mark, smiling sarcastically, "you speak as if I did not want to marry this maid of many virtues. Why, am I not doing all in my power, by my daily visits to worship at her shrine, to bring matters to a satisfactory conclusion? Really, mother, I don't quite understand your drift."

"Mark, when will you understand?" said his mother, a deep, sad tone coming into her voice. "Sit

down, my boy, and I will tell you something I have been on the point of making known to you a hundred times and more."

Sir Mark, now thoroughly uncomfortable and mystified, led his mother to a seat, seeing she was overcome with emotion, and took her hand in his by way of encouraging her to commence, an action that was not lost upon the fond parent, and, if anything, only seemed to disconcert her the more.

At last, however, with an effort she began:

"When I married your father, Mark, I was a very young girl. He did not court me long, but during the short period of our wooing I had fallen desperately and hopelessly in love with him. No doubt you will smile at the thought of your mother ever being deeply in love, but I was, Mark, and no one knows but myself how much. For the first six months I thought I was the happiest woman on earth." Lady Malda paused, and her eyes, that had been looking earnestly into her son's face, were suddenly cast down. "Men are April when they woo; December when they wed," she continued, "and I soon found that I had to share my husband's love with another. Oh! the shame of it," said the poor woman, covering her face with her hands. "Still I did not complain. I thought of the strength of my own love, and determined to win back his affections. I did try, Mark, oh! so hard. I even thought I had succeeded, but it was not to be—it was too late," said she, with a deep sigh. "One beautiful evening in August I was sitting on the terrace, at the spot where you so often see me sit, and where I am always recalling the events of that unhappy night. Your father had ridden into Taunton early in the day, and I was waiting to welcome him upon his return, when, hearing the sound of a horse's hoofs

upon the path, I looked up, and was startled to see your father's charger coming riderless up the avenue. With fear and trembling I ran as fast as my shaking limbs would carry me to meet the animal, which stopped directly I approached. I went up to him, and patted him, and stroked his mane. Suddenly I perceived something that made me call frantically for Simon. Before he arrived I had fallen in a dead faint to the ground, where my faithful servant found me, and carried me, still unconscious, to the house." During the latter part of her narrative Lady Malda appeared terribly agitated, and her face had assumed an ashen-grey pallor.

"Mother, dear, why distress yourself like this? You have told me before the details of my father's death."

"Listen, my boy; you have heard details, but never the truth," said his mother, in a voice quivering with emotion. "Let me see, Mark, what was I saying when you interrupted me?"

"You fainted, mother, and were carried into the house,"

"Yes;" she continued, recovering the thread of her story. "I was taken into the house unconscious, and very shortly afterwards you were born. Simon, as I was subsequently told, went with a party of men in search of your father, and brought him back dead. Yes, dead, Mark; but they never let me see him—I was too ill."

"Mother," said Sir Mark, growing more and more uncomfortable, "why do you tell me this? What has this fatal accident to my father to do with Grace Hewlyn?"

"Accident?" said Lady Malda, rising and drawing her hand wearily across her eyes as if to blot out

some terrible scene. "Oh! Mark! I wish to God it had been; but it was no accident, my son, it was murder."

"Murder!" echoed Sir Mark, aghast; "how do you know that? Did not the horse take fright at Triscombe Stone and throw his rider? Yes, mother, it was a pure accident, and nothing more."

"Mark," said his mother excitedly, "it was murder. I know it, for when I stroked the horse's mane, blood came off on my hands," and the poor lady shuddered at the remembrance. "Yes, blood on my hands," she repeated, "no fall would have caused that. Oh! Mark!" she continued, as she saw his incredulous look, "if you don't believe me, ask Simon; he knows it was no accident; but to save your father's honour he gave it out as such, and when I was well enough to hear his story I commended and approved his action."

"Mother, be calm; but say the scoundrel swung for it," said Sir Mark, his voice quivering with anger.

"Yes, Mark, he did," answered Lady Malda, rising and looking her son full in the face; "he was hanged at the cross-roads near Ashton Mill, for sheep-stealing."

Sir Mark started slightly. Was this reference to the Mill a mere chance allusion or made for a purpose? "Bah!" he said to himself, "I am a coward to-night, what can she know?"

"The rascal's death was not sufficient atonement for his crime. He should have been drawn and quartered had I had the trying of him; but still, mother," he continued in an altered tone, "to go back to the point, I cannot for the life of me see what all this has to do with Grace."

"My boy, my boy," she moaned in broken accents,

"oh! will you never understand, the motive of this crime—the motive?"

"No, mother, I fail to fathom your meaning," said he doggedly; "you must not speak in riddles, but tell me all plainly."

"It is perhaps better that is should be so. Your father, Mark, was killed by the lover of the girl he had wronged," she continued slowly, as if each word were like a dagger thrust into her heart as she uttered it.

Sir Mark turned ghastly white. His dark eyes endeavoured to pierce his mother's inmost thoughts. Why had she told him the true story of his father's death for the first time this night? She must have had some reason for so doing. Surely she could not know—but again he scouted the idea as preposterous, and with a forced nonchalance said: "Still, mother, I cannot see what it all has to do with me personally."

"Mark, a tale, an idle tale, has reached me. There is no truth in it, is there, my son?" said Lady Malda as she came to his side and laid her hand affectionately upon his arm. "I have lain awake night after night; I cannot sleep; your father's fate is ever before me. Had he only been warned," she moaned, "only warned in time, how different things would have been; he might have been alive to-day to behold his handsome counterpart. Yes, Mark," she continued, "I have thought and brooded over all this for days, until I could bear the suspense no longer, and so I resolved to warn you to-night. Forgive me, dear, but I could not help it."

"You say truly, mother," answered Sir Mark, with a poor attempt at a smile, "it is an idle tale about a humble maid to whom I have passed but the barest

gallantries, a kiss, a chuck beneath the chin, that's all," he concluded in an offhand manner.

"And Grace?" queried his mother; "has she heard aught of this?"

"Oh, a matter so trifling," he replied in an easy tone, "she would not deign to notice, even had it come to her ears."

"Have a care, Mark, have a care," said his mother in a warning voice. "She might resent it, more particularly if the case were enlarged upon in the telling. Ah! what was that?" and Lady Malda gave a frightened start, for just then the wind that had risen even higher than at the beginning of the evening wailed louder than ever, and seemed to die away in a heartrending sob. So human it appeared to the overwrought brain of the poor mother that it caused a convulsive shiver to pass over her frame, and she spasmodically clung to her son for protection.

"It is nothing but the wind, mother, which is wilder to-night than I have heard it all this winter," said Sir Mark, reassuringly.

"Look, look, Mark." exclaimed Lady Malda with dilated eyes and quivering hand, pointing in the direction of the table, "look, there is death in that candle; yes, death, death."

"My dearest mother," said Sir Mark coaxingly, putting his arm around her, "your story to-night has unnerved you. You will be much better after a rest. Meanwhile, I will put the offending light out."

Sir Mark stepped forward towards the candle that had burned low in its socket, and the wick of which was long and caked, giving a sickly flame and emitting a great deal of smoke; but just at the moment he approached with raised hand to place the extinguisher

upon it, the wick dropped with a splutter into the grease, and went out.

"Did you see that, Mark?" cried Lady Malda with a scared look, and at that moment the wind shrieked and sobbed even louder than before.

Sir Mark endeavouring to repress a slight shiver, answered: "Oh, yes, mother dear, I was saved trouble, that is all. Now go to bed, mother, and pray don't let such trifling matters worry you."

He kissed her gently upon the forehead, and walked with her as far as the porch leading to the staircase. After a final embrace, Lady Malda began to ascend, and Sir Mark watched her until she arrived at the top, when she turned towards him, and with a ghost of a smile waved him adieu.

After his mother's departure, Sir Mark once more took up his position at the fireplace, and savagely kicked the logs into a blaze. For quite an hour he stood there apparently gazing at the flames, but in reality thinking—thinking of his father's death, thinking of Kate Fletcher and of Grace, until he was disturbed by the voice of his old servant inquiring if he should wait up.

"No," Sir Mark answered sharply to his simple question.

"Shall I bring you a fresh light?" continued the old man, innocently pointing to the offending candlestick.

"No, damn the lights!" muttered Sir Mark angrily. "I am going to bed, and you can put them all out," and he strode away down the hall, leaving Simon staring with open mouth after him.

And the wind roared and whistled outside, whilst a mother and son lay with sleepless eyes, a nameless dread of future disaster ever in the thoughts of the one, whilst mortification and anger, coupled with a

sense of vague unrest, pervaded the mind of the other, as with burning head and aching eyes, he tossed to and fro upon his couch.

. . . . . .

"My lady's conversation has not been pleasant to-night," thought old Simon to himself whilst he was putting out the candles in the now silent hall; and as he walked out carrying a light in his hand, he turned instinctively to a full-length picture of his late master that hung near the door, and holding the light up to it so that he might get a better view, "It's no good," he murmured to himself, "no good. I can't see as I used to." Just as he was about to turn away, the log fire fell in, causing a flame to shoot up and reveal the face of the portrait, a face so like that of the young man who had just quitted the room that the old servant started back in alarm. The flame died down and the face disappeared as suddenly as it had come. The old man's eyes filled with tears, and mournfully shaking his silvery head, he walked wearily away, leaving the deserted apartment in darkness.

CHAPTER SEVENTH

ASHTON MILL

"WHAT is it that 'ee want now, Jack? This is the third time 'ee have hindered me in the last hour."

It was Widow Swaine who spoke, pausing in the act of placing a cake she had just shaped to her liking on the newly-brushed hearth, lately freed from the red-hot embers of a peat and wood fire.

This fire burnt brightly in the large, homely-looking kitchen that also served the purpose of an everyday living room for the inmates of Ashton Mill. Taking into consideration the size of the room, the huge fireplace seemed strangely out of place, and it might easily have been mistaken for some mysterious passage leading to the upper regions. A long, jagged iron bar hung from the centre of the chimney immediately over the hearth, and evidently served a useful purpose, the hook on the end being used to suspend a large iron kettle that was singing merrily away in anticipation of the near approach of a meal. Far up in the chimney several mysterious sooty bags might have been seen by any individual of an inquisitive turn of mind, hanging upon the hooks that projected at short intervals upon the iron rod, and Widow Swaine would have explained that each of these mysterious bags contained a leg of one of the porcine tribe undergoing the process of being turned into a succulent ham, destined at some

ɔaking. The tone in which she admonisl
ıis interruptions was not so cross as th
uggested; for although the sharp-tong
Coombs of the "Lamb" inn was her sis
vere two dispositions so utterly unlike.
o assign a reason for so marked a diff
empers of the two women, but, if a gu
ıazarded, the acidity of the hostess of
night be ascribed to the manner in wl
ıusbands had tried the poor woman's
irst John's languid manner, lack of int
ıealth, irritated a woman of her bustl
nent, as much as did the blustering dem
ɔoastful, cider-loving second spouse. A
Mistress Coombs' occupation caused her
o assume the authoritative tone with w
o frequently obliged to treat a too
ıustomer. However, be that as it may,
n the two sisters' manners was so mar
reely commented upon by all who knew

Jack remained fidgeting about in the
nade no reply to his mother's question,
ıer to continue: "I can't make 'ee ou
loan't 'ee speak t' lass? All 'ee do when th
s to make sheep's eyes and stand a-stari

lad? why doan't 'ee speak?" concluded Mistress Swaine.

"I dussent, mother: I vear Kate doan't care vor the likes o' me."

"You be a vool!" said his mother warmly. "There be 'ee wi' as good a drade as may be, dree horses, a waggon, and zo good a house as a body mit wish vor. Bless my zoul, what do 'ee think t' lass wants? and 'ee, too, who might have any maid vor t' asking, aveared to speak out to this girl when she be a-longing an' a-zighing vor'ee from morn till night. I've got no patience wi' 'ee, Jack. What is there in this simple lass, a good lass, too, that she should be a-lookin' above 'ee?"

Jack stood facing his mother as she rose from her stooping position in front of the fire after having attended to her cakes, the fragrant odour of which pervaded the apartment, and had he been about to enter the royal presence, he could not have been more abashed than he now appeared. It was absurd to see this broad-shouldered young giant as he stood there fumbling nervously with his hands, for all the world like a great schoolboy to whom a caning is about to be administered.

Seeing his discomfort, his mother was unable to restrain herself from laughing as she suggested his returning to his work, slyly adding she would call him if he did not see Kate arrive.

"Why, here she be, lad, in all her best ribbons, an' lookin' mighty grand," exclaimed his mother a moment later, as through the open window she caught sight of Kate coming along the roadway. It was clear from Jack's face that he had seen her, too, for he seemed to brace himself together as if to carry into effect some well-thought-out plan; but apparently his courage failed him, for as his mother hastened for-

ward to welcome her niece, he retired discreetly into the shade, from which he did not emerge until he was pulled to the front by his pretty little cousin, who laughingly exclaimed: "Oh, Jack, you do look big. Why, I believe you've grown since I went away."

Not even the warmth of her greeting and her lively chatter put him at his ease, for he still continued to stand in the background fidgeting and blushing.

This was Kate's first visit to the Mill since she had entered Grace Hewlyn's service, and she was naturally full of the doings of the folks at the Manor and the kindness of her mistress. The way she rattled out her news would have taken the breath away from any other individual less eager than Mistress Swaine to receive the information, for she was a true woman and dearly loved a gossip. Jack all the time looked upon his fair cousin in silent admiration, or, as his mother had said, made sheep's eyes at her. Kate at length began to feel somewhat ashamed of monopolising the whole of the conversation by talking so much of her own concerns, and so inquired of her aunt as the three seated themselves at the table what they had been doing during her absence.

"Much the same, lass, as when you was wi' us," replied her aunt. "Jack thought he was a-going' t' lose one of the horses, but 'tis well again now."

"Oh! Jack," cried Kate in her impetuous way; "which was it?"

It was an unfortunate moment the girl had chosen to address her cousin, as he had just filled his mouth with cake, not anticipating he would be called upon to join in the conversation, and it was with a certain amount of difficulty he managed to reply: "Not your'ne, Kate, not your'ne, or I should 'a let 'ee know, lass."

"And what have you been doing, Jack?" continued the girl. "I had one of the trout you sent to Mistress Grace."

"That were right, my girl; they was meant for 'ee, I reckon," interposed her aunt.

Jack had opened his mouth to reply, but his mother's well-meant interruption somewhat upset him, so that when he did find his tongue his reply was not quite so fluent as it might have been. In fact, it tended rather to the commonplace, and was to the effect that "he trusted Mistress Grace liked the fish," an opportunity lost, as his mother was not slow to perceive, and she hastily endeavoured to mend matters by recalling to her son's recollection that "Kate said she had one, Jack."

Now when a third party interferes in a question of the heart, however well disposed he or she may be, the result is generally disastrous; and this case proved no exception to the rule, as it only brought out from Jack a muttered expression of hope that the fish were fresh, a remark which, to say the least of it, seemed a trifle absurd, seeing that he had himself caught them but half an hour previous to their being deposited at the Manor. What also made matters even worse was that his mother thought fit to make some excuse to leave the pair together, a ruse unattended with any successful result, as, when she returned, neither had uttered a word. Jack had thought of a hundred things to say, but had never got beyond that point. Poor fellow, he was deplorably unversed in the art of love-making, and his companion did not appear to have the inclination to help him at all in the matter.

"I suppose," was Widow Swaine's next question, "Sir Mark pays great attention to Mistress Grace? '*E*," laying marked emphasis on the pronoun, for

reasons of her own, "is not backward in makin' love, I'll warrant; 'e be a right merry gentleman. What a bonny pair they will make, to be sure."

Jack's eyes wandered from his mother to the table, whilst Kate blushed crimson at the mention of her lover's name, and answered with a great deal more warmth than the occasion seemed to call for: "Sir Mark is no lover of Mistress Grace. He is a gallant, but not a lover."

"No lover?" repeated her aunt in astonishment; "'ee do 'stound me. Why, 'tis common gossip, but then gossip be sure to be wrong, vor was it not zaid by every volk as ould Zoloman Tamzin 'ud wed Varmer Hemby's widder, an' bless us, if 'e aint a-took the darter and made an ould vool of hisself inter the bargain. Maybe," continued the widow, "Master Annersley be vavoured; 'e were as vine a lad as I did ever clap eyes 'pon, an' they du zay t' Squire were mortal vond er 'e."

"Oh, he's a soldier, Jack, and has seen a lot of fighting with some great men in foreign parts. I love soldiers," said Kate enthusiastically, addressing her cousin. Jack felt that had an opportunity arisen he would have entered His Majesty's service there and then.

"He is such a kind gentleman," continued Kate; "a great deal with the Squire, too, I know, for Mistress Grace does continually complain that he must take up too much of her father's time."

"Or," chimed in her aunt with another lunge at her son's weak spot, "maybe she thinks his time mit be better occupied with her."

"He rides out a lot by himself, and very late at night, too; he says the life he has been accustomed to lead makes him restless."

"At nights," said her aunt aghast, "when honest volk be abed, an' the roads given up to highwaymen, an' gibbeted men walk!" and Widow Swaine looked quite frightened at the mere imagination of such a proceeding. Jack, on the contrary, seemed to take a lively interest in the last piece of information.

The three continued to linger over the meal, chatting away; or, to be more correct, the two women carried out that part of the programme, Jack being content to remain a passive listener. He knew that his opportunity for talking would come later on in the evening, and he was making up his mind what he should say and how he should put his thoughts into words sufficiently eloquent to express his feelings to this bewitching little fairy in female form.

Although the April evenings were lengthening out, yet the hour for Kate's departure was fast approaching, and honest John was looking forward to his walk back to the Manor with his cousin with a feeling of pleasure not unmixed with a certain amount of anxiety.

At length the three rose from the table, and Jack waited on the threshold of the doorway whilst his mother bade good-bye to her niece, during which interval what little self-possession he might have summoned up a few minutes before oozed out and escaped at his finger-tips.

The pair walked down the little, narrow garden path bordered on each side by a small patch of ground that Mistress Swaine assiduously cultivated as a flower-garden. Kate stopped to draw her cousin's attention to the plants and shrubs now showing in all their beauty of freshest green, notwithstanding the very severe winter they had endured. As he opened the wooden gate for her to pass over the large flag-stone that served the purpose of a miniature bridge spanning

the tiniest of brooks, a brilliant thought struck him with which to start the conversation—the weather. Yes, even in the seventeenth century that threadbare but useful subject served its purpose as it does at the present day.

"A hard winter we've had, Kate, an' I'm aveared we'll have naught but primroses to offer 'ee on first o' May." He would have continued, but the girl interrupted him with:

"I don't think you need bother yourself about me, Jack, this year, for I shan't be Queen."

"Not Queen!" he replied quickly; "why 'ee be bound to be chosen." His courage must have returned for he added: "'Ee'll make a beautiful Queen, Kate, aye, the prettiest lass as ever wore a crown, that I ever seed; and t' think as you'd refuse. Why, Kate, you'd be the envy of every girl in the town. What ails 'ee, lass? what ails 'ee?"

"Naught ails me, Jack; but I shan't be Queen this year," said the girl decisively.

"Nor next neither," quickly interposed Jack, "no married woman is Queened, an' 'ee'll be wed, Kate, avore next year comes, you mark my words."

"Who says so, Jack?"

"I zay zo, I——"

"Never! Never!! Never!!! Jack, when I marry I shall wed a gentleman, with silk hose, braided coat, jewelled sword, lace cuffs, soft white hands, and—let me see,"—continued the girl, trying to think, "one who will take me to church in his coach. Now, how long do you think I shall have to wait, Jack?" and for answer she looked laughingly into her cousin's face. She saw it was clouded; she guessed his secret. He had taken her at her word.

"'Ee ought not to wait long, my lass," he answered

with slow earnestness in a tone of deep-set melancholy.

After this the two walked along in the still evening air in silence. Kate, half afraid she had said a little too much, the other thinking of his undelivered speech which her words had made utterly unsuitable for the occasion. The Manor gates were reached, and his opportunity, even if he had wished to make use of it, was lost; for there were the Squire, Mistress Hewlyn, her daughter, and Captain Annersley, walking in the garden. They all observed Swaine and the company he was in, and with consideration they did not approach the pair; but in Jack's eyes they appeared to be at his very elbow.

"Forget me, Jack; don't trouble about me." Then seeing his look of utter dejection the girl added: "I will try and go with you to the Maying. Good-bye, Jack," she concluded in a half-whisper, and then hurried away towards the house.

Her companion, half-dazed, stood where she had left him until he was aroused by a cheery "Good-night, Swaine," from the Squire, who added: "Won't you have a cup of cider before you go?"

Jack placed his hand respectfully to his forehead, but his answer was: "No thank 'ee, Squire," and with a quick stride he bent his steps homewards. He could not feel the ground under him as he walked, his legs were as if they had suddenly been weighted with so much lead. One thought, and one thought only, ran in his head. She will marry a gentleman. Yes, he was sure his bonny Kate was fit to fill such a station in life, and his great heart sank within him. Oh, why had he ever let her leave the Mill? His meditations were momentarily interrupted by his arrival at the gate, which only so short a time before he had opened with a light heart

to let his pretty cousin pass out. He felt he could not enter the house and face his mother just then; he would go round to the Mill and brood over his sorrow unseen by human eyes. He walked into the wheel-house. All was silent save for the occasional drip, drip, drip of the water as it fell from the now motionless wheel, a fitting accompaniment to the beating of his aching heart. He sat down with his head between his hands.

"Could he ever be a gentleman, and keep a coach, or even be a soldier?" he moaned to himself, "and would Kate love him then?"

How long he sat he knew not, neither did he care; it was his mother's voice that roused him.

"Jack, how long avore 'ee be a-goin' to bed?" she asked as she stood before him, holding a lanthorn so that the light fell full upon his dejected figure.

"I had zummat to vind, mother, zo I came in here," he answered.

"Mit zo be, it were better to look in the light than in the dark, my zon," said his mother kindly, for she saw at a glance something was wrong.

"Lend me t' light, mother," he said, and stretching out his hand for the lanthorn he proceeded mechanically to fasten up the doors and windows.

"Jack, my poor boy," said his mother, "what did that proud minx zay to 'ee?"

"Nay, mother, she be no proud minx," answered Jack sadly, "the lass be right: I be not vit vor the likes o' her."

"Odds a mercy! what be the world a-comin' to?" said Widow Swaine, holding up her hands in horror at the bare idea of her Jack not being good enough for any girl.

CHAPTER EIGHTH

CASTLES OF SAND

SINCE the evening of Sir Mark's interview with his mother he had been ill at ease, and although three weeks had elapsed he had as yet been unable to make up his mind as to what course it was best to pursue in order to free himself from the influence to which Lady Malda had alluded.

The more he had thought the matter over the more convinced he became that the only way out of the difficulty was to break off his relations with Kate Fletcher if he wished to assure his position with Grace Hewlyn, and he felt that the sooner he carried out this project the better. So with this object in view he had at length screwed up his courage to finally settle the matter.

On the day that he had intended should witness the triumph of his resolution, he had walked over to the Manor, as was his invariable custom, early in the morning, and as he left the hospitable roof of the Hewlyn's with his mind fully made up as to his future course of action, he was thoroughly satisfied, and salved his conscience with many virtuous resolves and resolutions.

The weather, metaphorically speaking, was propitious, and, in nautical language, Sir Mark had only to round the headland and make for the port. True the headland might be a little dangerous, but it was such a little one, he felt sure with moderate judgment and care upon his part he would have no

difficulty in rounding it; and once that was accomplished all would be plain sailing to the port, *i.e.*, his engagement with Grace.

Everything had gone well with him that day. Annersley, for instance, for whom he had never shown any particular partiality, nor Annersley for him for the matter of that, had paid marked deference to his opinion. Indeed on most of the subjects touched upon in their conversation during the afternoon, the Captain had been in absolute agreement with him, and Grace, who had taken contrary views, had been left in a most unceremonious manner in a minority of one. On the other hand, when Annersley had been speaking of the late King's favourites, holding, as Grace remarked, the sanctity of the marriage-tie in little reverence—though in truth, he had only suggested the probability that incompatibility of temper might be urged in palliation of Charles' marital shortcomings—Grace had taken Annersley to task for his views with a warmth suggestive of possible disagreements between the pair. Altogether, he felt that the girl's demeanour towards himself had reverted again to the position in which it stood before his rival came to the Manor upon a visit that had caused him, he now had reason to hope, great but unnecessary uneasiness. All this tended to strengthen his resolve, and he was determined to strike whilst circumstances were so propitious, and should he meet Kate Fletcher, as he fully expected to do, to put an end to an intimacy that he felt more strongly than ever was jeopardising his wished-for union with Grace.

As he walked briskly away from the Manor, pondering all these matters in his mind, the expression upon his face indicated a set purpose boding ill for the fair castle, bathed in perpetual sunshine, in which little

Kate Fletcher had been living in imagination ever since the day when she had first met her gentleman lover, and he had poured sweet nothings into her willing but untutored ear.

Sir Mark had walked for about three quarters of a mile along what was the high road, although it was little more than a lane, with its cart-ruts that in winter assumed the proportion of miniature rivers, and even now in springtime rendered it necessary to exercise a certain amount of care in walking. Suddenly he made a sharp turn to the right on to an unfrequented track crossing some fields, doubtless used as a short cut by the occupants of a neighbouring farmhouse. He had evidently reached his destination, the appointed place of meeting, for he seated himself upon a conveniently fallen piece of timber, and commenced to prod holes impatiently with his cane in the unoffending turf. He had not long to wait before a girlish figure was seen approaching in the distance. In some respects she resembled the child in the fairy story, for she carried a basket on her arm, although she did not tarry to pluck the wild flowers that grew in abundance upon all sides. On the contrary, she quickly espied the virtuous wolf, and hurried unsuspectingly towards him. It was broad daylight, so even in this sparsely-populated part of the country it was quite possible that the meeting between the lovers might be observed by prying eyes. Some such idea seemed to cross Sir Mark's mind, causing him to release himself with petulance from the girl's confiding embrace; this, however, she failed to observe as she hastily proceeded to tell him how she had cunningly curtailed the errand of mercy upon which Grace had sent her to one of the Squire's sick tenants, and how in her hurry to leave that she might

have a few minutes longer with him, she had omitted to ascertain from the sufferer half the information she had been directed to obtain.

At the conclusion of this recital, Kate looked up into her lover's face for the customary recognition observable between lovers when a successful feat of deception has been accomplished, and which her zealous anxiety to meet him, she felt, fully deserved.

But she looked in vain. Sir Mark felt that any little weakness, such as a glance of encouragement, would only make the unpleasant task he had before him doubly hard, not only for the confiding girl at his side, but what was more to the point, for himself also, and his face assumed a stern aspect as he looked at the frail figure, and upturned little face. But slowly the girl's arms entwined his neck, and he allowed her graceful head to rest upon his shoulder. Softly she murmured: "Say you love me, Mark."

It would please her, he said to himself, if he uttered those few words that meant so much to her and so little to him, and besides, was it not the last time they were to meet under similar circumstances?

"I love you, Kate," he whispered.

She did not speak, but lifted her pretty lips to his—would that deter him from the object he had in view?

A robin, as he flew towards his nest with a little red worm in his beak for his hungry brood, records that their lips met. That, said his mate on being informed of the circumstances, was but a natural consequence.

Sir Mark released himself from the girl's embrace, and clearing his throat, said in a husky voice: "I want you to leave the Manor, Kate."

He might have spared himself the diffidence he had felt in making the remark, for her eyes glistened and a joyous expression spread over her face as she answered:

"Oh, Mark dear, I am so glad, so glad. I have been a-feared to tell thee——" she paused, and as he looked into her face, he guessed her secret, and was dumb. She, abashed, let her head sink again upon his shoulder until tears came to her relief, then she sobbed as if her heart would break. In broken accents she told him how miserable she had been of late without him, and how the other maids at the Manor had upset her, unintentionally of course, by telling her that he loved her mistress, an assertion that she was unable to contradict although she knew it was not true; besides, she could not help seeing that Grace loved Captain Annersley.

"What do you mean, girl?" said Sir Mark harshly, her last words awakening him from his reverie, jealousy making him swerve from his set purpose. Then collecting himself he added in a softer tone: "How do you know that she loves this man?"

"I know, Mark dear, when a woman loves," the girl answered, caressing him. Kate's answer and her caresses did not tend to reassure him, and he continued, trying to assume an indifference he was far from feeling: "What is this man's business, Kate? Does he make no sign of leaving the Manor?"

Kate was in no mood to gratify his curiosity just then. Had she known the truth her replies could hardly have been more tantalizing. Instead of answering his questions, she put another to him:

"Mark dear," she murmured, opening her eyes wide and looking shyly at him, "would you be in a hurry to leave me?"

H edid not answer her. He was growing uneasy and impatient. The short time she might safely remain with him was fast departing, and he felt he was as far off, if not farther off, from carrying out his resolution

as ever. Now his thoughts took another direction. The obstacle he had hoped to remove still remained, he had made an effort and the girl's answer had completely nonplussed him. How could he learn more of this man who seemed to thwart him at every turn?

"Kate," he proceeded, "does it not interest you to talk of other loves as well as of our own?"

"No, Mark," was the innocent reply, "I could for ever talk of ours."

"Tut, tut, child," he answered, impatiently, "you would soon grow tired of that. Tell me, do they love each other as we do?"

"No, Mark, it would be impossible to love as I love thee. But I know Mistress Grace loves him."

"Surely she has not told you so!" exclaimed Sir Mark with an air of undisguised disgust.

"No, Mark, but she has spoken to me several times of him, whilst I have attended her toilet, and has asked me what Captain Annersley is doing, and if I have heard him come home in the evening." At last Kate was becoming communicative and Sir Mark's interest being thoroughly aroused, he repeated her last words. "In the evening?" "I mean the morning," returned Kate correcting herself, "he frequently rides out after dark and does not come back until after midnight. I heard him one morning go to his room just as the day was breaking. Aunt Swaine says it bodes no good, and Mistress Grace is mighty curious to know his errand. I think she fears it is some wild scheme that may lead him into danger. She seemed much distressed when she told me of it, and I felt so sorry for her. Then she told me," continued Kate in a confidential whisper, "that she had teased him about it; and that he had only laughed and made fun of it."

"Has she given you any idea what she thinks his nightly errands are?" asked Sir Mark.

Kate little dreamt how anxiously her hearer awaited her reply, and the disaster her answer might work for all concerned.

"She thinks," answered the girl, "that the friends of the Duke of Monmouth are trying to make him King."

"The Duke of Monmouth, girl? Are you sure she mentioned the Duke's name?" said Sir Mark in a tone that betrayed his excitement.

"Oh, yes; I am sure it was the Duke," replied Kate decisively. The clouds had broken again. Kate must stay at the Manor for a time at all events; she could be of use to him, He kissed her with an amount of warmth that delighted the poor child, and promised in a few weeks to take her away from the Manor to a place where she would be her own mistress, have servants of her own, dresses, ribbons, laces,—in fact, everything her heart could desire.

Kate drank in her lover's honeyed words like a bee that has just entered a flower newly opened by the rays of the morning sun, until the evening shadows warned her that unless she made haste it might be dark before she reached the Manor.

So she left him on the spot where they had met, not knowing of the resolutions he had formed earlier in the day, and how nearly her castle, that now appeared more beautiful than ever, had been to resolving itself into a barren rock. She was never to know. Kate Fletcher had at least that mercy vouchsafed to her.

Sir Mark sat watching the girl until she was out of sight. He felt sorry for her, but still he could act handsomely towards this woman who loved him with a love his own selfish disposition could not understand. He was glad he had not carried out his determination

to break with her; it might have caused a scene, and he hated scenes; and besides if he had been too precipitate he would probably never have learnt what he had done. Now he had made a discovery that might bring him fame. He could make use of the information against more than one individual if necessity arose, and Kate would be of great assistance to him. As for Annersley, he would make short work of him, and if Grace were going to play him false, and his information could be relied upon, there would be no occasion for him to plead his cause; he would command.

With these thoughts in his mind he rose and proceeded towards Stow Hall, singing a loyal song for King Charles the Restored which ran something like this:—

"Here's a health unto His Majesty,
With a fal lal la la la.
Confusion to his enemies,
With a fal lal la la la.
And he that will not drink his health,
I wish him neither wit nor wealth,
Nor yet a rope to hang himself,
With a fal lal la la la,
With a fal lal la la la."

If Sir Mark's actions as he sang this ditty were any indication of the vigour of his loyalty to his late Majesty, his enemies would have had a sanguinary time; for he wielded his cane with some little malice, and struck off the heads of every plant that pompously thrust forward its neck in front of its neighbours and thus unfortunately came within reach of his weapon. A lesson in humility not lost upon the daisies as they slowly encased their yellow heads for the night. Altogether, he felt in a buoyant spirit, a state of mind he had not experienced since the evening his mother had told him of his father's murder and had warned him of the danger of his intrigue with Grace Hewlyn's maid.

CHAPTER NINTH

STEART FLATS

ON the shore of the Bristol Channel, just before the coast line commences to rise by reason of its proximity to the Quantock Hills, there exists a large tract of low-lying country, known from time immemorial as Stert or Steart Flats, a dreary expanse extending some four or five miles, having for its foreshore a narrow rim of pebbles with an outer belt of sand and mud—but more mud than either sand or pebbles—the whole inspiring the observer with a keen sense of quiet and solitude. Here there is no sound of life save the plaintive cries of the gulls or other sea scavengers from the rocks and tiny islets of the distant Holmes, and nothing to break the monotony and flatness of this sea-board desert, excepting it may be the slight indentations that mark the progress of the receding tide, and the pebbles left to bleach in the sun until an ill wind comes to lend its aid to the waves in their endeavours to reclaim them. A few miles further on, the coast-line, exhibits a vivid contrast to this picture. It increases in grandeur till the sister counties of Devon and Cornwall are reached, when it forms rugged and picturesque walls: ramparts provided by nature for the purpose of resisting the encroachments of the ever pilfering Atlantic.

It was between Steart Flats, and the spot where

this chapel, was the church of the Establishment, a building with a little square tower, the whole being so diminutive that it might easily have been mistaken for a cardboard model, had it not been for the fact that it stood in the centre of an acre of ground, the little green mounds of which bore silent testimony to its being the burial-place of the parish. The combined congregations of these two places of worship, even in the summer time, fell short of a hundred souls, many coming from comparatively long distances to attend the services. All this might augur well for the collections, if not for the King's revenue, so what the King lost in revenue, the congregations probably made up for by their piety.

Within hail of the Established Church stood a small, white, thatched cottage, in which dwelt the most important personage in this small community excepting with all due reverence the ecclesiastical element. This celebrity was Master James Croad of Kilve. Now by what means Master Jim earned a livelihood, no one pretended to know, nor for the matter of that had they the remotest chance of ascertaining, for the man was his own housekeeper. He apparently did no work, was always decently attired, fond of a chat, and generally thought to be good company, as every man was considered to be who was as ready as Master Jim to stand treat. In addition he surrounded himself with a halo of sanctity, and those who had the cure of souls always had a good word to say for him. Jim Croad, indeed, had no enemies, even the most unruly of young urchins respected him in his presence, though behind his back they were guilty of calling him "Old Dewdrop," or "Old Croad," but they nicknamed him, not on account of any dislike, but simply because they happened to

be mischievous young urchins with nothing better to do. Jim was sharp featured, tall, thin, and with a strikingly pale face, which a dark but scanty beard was unable to conceal. His eyes were small, bright and restless; his voice had a peculiar high falsetto note in it, and always appeared to crack at least once in every sentence he uttered. His general appearance gave one the impression that he was suffering from a chronic influenza cold, hence his young friends' somewhat accurate appellation. If the truth must be told, Master James Croad was nothing more nor less than an unlicensed dealer in wines, spirits, tobaccos, snuffs, silks, and any other contraband articles he could lay his bony hands upon. In other words, to put the matter plainly, Jim was a smuggler. Yet, if appearance went for anything, ninety-nine persons out of every hundred who had the power of conjuring up the necessary qualifications for one connected with that nefarious and daring calling, would have scouted the idea of Master Croad being in any way connected with it.

To-day, time had appeared to hang heavily on Jim's hands, and so, for want of something better to do, he took a somewhat long walk, the termination of which found him at Ashton Mill. Jack Swaine was hard at work, his head, face, and person generally, were white with flour, making him look every inch a typical miller. He was about to adjust the mouth of a sack, and was in the act of tying it up, when a shadow darkened the doorway, and looking up he beheld the gaunt figure of Jim Croad gazing at him with an apparent air of disgust as much as to say: "You work precious hard for your money, my friend."

"Hullo, Jim!" ejaculated Swaine as he recognised his visitor, "vine day, bean't it?" to which greeting

the other first replied with a nod, and then added as if the thought had just struck him:

"You'm right; 'tis vine, and mortal waarm too, I vind."

Swaine knew what this remark portended and disappeared into the house, returning in a few minutes bearing a leathern mug filled with a liquid certainly not cider, from the delicate manner with which the other held it, smacking his lips with contentment as he slowly sipped the contents.

"Bean't got much more o' that there zort, Jim," Swaine ventured to add, after he had watched his friend's careful and critical test of the vintage, with a respect due to a better judgment; and if facial expression was any criterion of the opinion Croad had formed, the wine must have been excellent indeed, each sip appearing to give him increased satisfaction.

"When be 'ee going t' have another run?" continued Swaine, when his friend had finally drained his mug to the dregs. From this remark it was clear that Jack was quite aware of the nature of Master Croad's business, which was the truth, for although Swaine gained his livelihood honestly and paid both tithe to the parson and tax to the king, he saw no harm in occasionally lending his friend a pair of horses. It was a loan for which he demanded no payment; but Jack's cellar usually contained a supply of wine of a quality somewhat superior to that owned by most men in his station of life, neither did he bother his head to makes inquiries whether all dues had been paid on it.

"There be a zite too much light now, Jack, an' I vear 'e have t' bide till the vall; but they du zay there be goin' t' be a run of another zort to-night, wi' a bit of a vite inter the bargain, I du reckon."

Jack did not quite grasp his friend's meaning, but, always glad to hear any news that was stirring, stayed his work for a moment and said:

"Well 'ee won't let 'em unload here, will 'ee, Jim? it bean't vair to 'ee. Let 'em land the stuff in their own bay; that be what I zay, Jim."

"I will zee t' that, Jack, but 'tis not them Minehead chaps this time, and t' run bean't rum or such like; tes powder an' other murderous stuff."

"Powder, Jim! an' how did 'ee hear tell o' this?" said Jack, now thoroughly interested.

"Well, I bean't at liberty to zay, but powder and shot it be, on the vurrin craft I zee out yonder these mornin'. It ain't got none o' our zort aboard. Me an' zome more are to wait on her to-night and take any of the crew that tries to land, dead or alive, that's our orders. I allus likes ter 'sist His Majesty's officers to prevent a breach o' the peace," added Jim Croad with a sarcastic grin.

"Tes a mighty queer cargo, Jim. What be they a-going to land powder an' flintlocks vor in these quiet parts?"

"Well, I weren't told that; but we must be zure to lay our han's on a gentleman, who they do zay, has an object in duing zo, and who be a-watching the coast every night."

Swaine rose from his seat and resumed his work. Presently he said:

"How many of 'ee be a-going on to-night's job?"

"I reckon there will be 'bout a dozen o' us a-waiting doon by the chapel. 'Ee coom and lend a hand; we'll make it warm vor 'em, 'ee may be sure."

"I be zorry, but can't help 'ee t'-night, Jim," said Swaine.

"Nonsense, Jack; that pretty miss will give 'ee leave o' absence."

"Well, if zo be I can come, I will," replied Swaine. After skimming over the latest gossip, Jim Croad took his departure with a final injunction to Jack to be "zure and coom an' zee t' vun."

When Jim Croad's figure had vanished from sight, Jack sat down to think over the news he had just heard. It all appeared quite clear to him. Annersley's allusion to the great Duke when the King's death was made known; Kate's statement to her aunt that Annersley was in the habit of making excursions after dark upon some secret errand: what else could it all mean but that the friends of the Duke of Monmouth contemplated taking immediate action to assert their master's lawful rights to the throne of England? Swaine became sorely puzzled as to the best mode of action with regard to apprising Annersley of the contemplated attempt to capture him. If he went straight to the Manor and told the Captain he could not well warn the ship's crew at the same time; Jim's men would in all probability wait until the sailors were busily engaged in landing their cargo. One thing he decided at all hazards: Annersley must be saved; but he could not make up his mind whether this could best be done by accepting Jim Croad's invitation to join the party or not.

. . . . . .

Under the shadow of a bank, just above high-water mark, stood Hubert Annersley. He was anxiously looking out to sea, his eyes strained in their endeavour to penetrate the gloom beyond. One hand was resting on his horse's mane as if for support, an action the animal seemed quite to understand as it remained perfectly motionless by its master's side. The night

was a dark one. The air was very calm; heavy clouds flitted across the moon; not a sound broke the stillness save the ripple of the waves of the incoming tide, nor could any living soul be seen as far as the eye could reach. That, however, was no great distance, as the sea itself, in reality, was but fifty or sixty yards away from the watcher, and could only be perceived when the clouds parted for an instant and let the moon peep out upon the scene. Neither the darkness nor the stillness that reigned about him seemed to disconcert Annersley, for his eyes were persistently fixed in one direction. Apparently he was looking into space, but in reality his practised ear had detected a sound far out at sea. At first it was indistinct, and came at uncertain intervals; but now he could hear that it was slowly but surely approaching in his direction. He commenced to look about him for a suitable spot where he could tether his horse, and having found one, and secured the animal, he began to make his way over the broken and seaweed-strewn ground towards the water's edge. His ears now distinctly recognised the splash of oars, and so he hurried along in the direction of the spot he had settled in his mind to be the most suitable for beaching a boat.

As soon as the boat was well within earshot, Annersley gave a peculiar low whistle. It was almost immediately responded to by a man who could be seen standing in the bow of the boat, that in another half-minute touched ground. The man leapt ashore, and had hardly exchanged greetings with the Captain when a sound behind arrested their attention. At first Annersley thought that it was his horse that had broken its tether to follow him, but closer observation showed that it was a man, who appeared to be

hastening over the rugged surface in their direction. Annersley drew his sword, expecting an encounter, when suddenly a well-known voice cried:

"Quick, zir, quick! 'Ee are betrayed! vollow me or yo'um caught."

A hurried conversation followed, and the man who had jumped ashore gave the boat a shove to send it into deep water, and then scrambled back over the bow. Annersley waited to see that the boat was well off, and then proceeded to follow Swaine over the slippery ground as rapidly as circumstances would permit. More than once he fell in his haste; his companion on the contrary seemed quite at home upon the uneven surface, and cleared all obstacles at a bound. In a few minutes high-water mark was reached, also the horses, and Swaine, vaulting into his saddle, cried out under his breath impatiently:

"Vollow me, zir, quick. We'm goin' to gi' the devils the waarmest run that they ever had i' their lives," and Swaine chuckled to himself at his joke, as he set his heels into the sides of his horse, causing it to start off at a gallop. Annersley was not quite as nimble as Swaine, and as he was about to follow in his wake, he observed in the darkness some forms moving quickly in the direction of a gap in the hedge through which Jack had just disappeared, and through which he would also be bound to pass. Drawing a pistol from his belt, he took aim at the foremost figure. There was a flash, and a report followed by a sharp cry; the bullet had evidently found a resting-place in some part of a human anatomy, and the next moment the horse shot like an arrow from the bow through the now unguarded aperture, carrying his master beyond the reach of danger.

Swaine had drawn rein at some little distance

on the other side of the gap to give Annersley the opportunity of coming up with him, when both horses resumed a leisurely trot along the road, which was none too easy to travel in the darkness. To continue a headlong gallop on a cross-country track so little used, would but have ended in a certain disaster.

"'E's hit, zir, e's hit," exclaimed Swaine, excitedly, after they had ridden for a short distance.

"Who is hit, Jack?" asked Annersley.

"Why, ould Jim Croad, zir; I could tell his holler vor sure 'mong a thousand; but I don't think 'e be much hurt, vor I zee him abreast the gap after 'ee came dru, zir, an' I do warrant 'e'll broach a fresh keg to-night to drown the pain. I'll pay my respects to him in the morning, and bless my stars as 'e didn't zee me."

"But how came you here, friend Jack?" queried Annersley.

"Well, zir, it be these way." And Swaine related how, quite by chance, he had received information of the intended capture, and how he had put two and two together, with the result that he had his suspicions that the Captain was implicated.

"Jack," said Annersley, when his comrade had concluded his story, "it would have gone ill with the Duke's cause had I been captured to-night, and worse with me, I reckon. I shall remember this service as long as I live, and rest assured that I will see that your brave act does not go unrewarded; the Duke himself shall thank you in person ere many days have flown, my lad."

"I doan't want no reward, zir. I be but too proud to zerve zo noble a gentleman as the Duke, God bless un," was Swaine's reply. "To-night, zir," continued Jack, "I'll show 'ee the way back to the Manor, which

I'll warrant 'ee doan't know, an' we be not likely again to run across them blackguards."

Annersley thanked his friend, and as they rode along side by side Hubert felt the time had come to make a confidant of this man who had risked his life to save him. He therefore unfolded all his plans and preparations to aid the cause of His Grace of Monmouth, and told him of his hopes that the time was not far distant when the legitimate son of Charles would reign in the place of the usurper James.

Jack Swaine thirsted for no reward, but Kate Fletcher's words were ringing in his ears, and all the time that Annersley was painting in glowing colours the virtues of the great Duke, he could hear her saying: "How I love soldiers." Why should not he win glory at the point of the sword or at the mouth of the cannon, and rewards besides. Captain Annersley had said he could. Then he would let his sweetheart see that he could buy her as many ribbons and laces as any gentleman in the land. He would anticipate her every wish, even to riding to church in a coach. The great Duke himself might even attend the wedding; who knew? And so Jack's thoughts ran on during the remainder of the journey to the Manor, and when Annersley shook his brave friend heartily by the hand, and told him once again he should never forget his part in the night's work, poor honest Jack rode on his homeward journey with elated spirits, feeling that the clouds had broken, and the sunshine of happiness had burst in its full glory upon him. The path of fame lay open before him, and he would at last be worthy to approach the one being to whom his great heart had gone out in a first and lifelong love, as pure as the water in the little brook that ran so merrily by his own home.

CHAPTER TENTH

A PARTING

HUBERT ANNERSLEY, although he was aware that a trusty messenger had been despatched to Amsterdam with a missive containing the intelligence of the King's demise, knew that some little time must elapse ere the friends of the Duke of Monmouth would become possessed of that important piece of information. When it was made known to the Duke's followers over the sea, Annersley felt that a crisis in his life would be reached to which he had eagerly been looking forward from day to day. Ever since he had first heard of the King's death, and had thought matters over, he had begun to realise to the full the sacrifice he would be called upon to make for the good of the cause with which he had of his own free will chosen to associate himself; and it was with a heavy heart he arose each morning knowing that it was bringing him nearer and nearer to the hour when he must make up his mind to bid adieu to Heathercombe Manor and its inmates. The thought of leaving the hospitable roof where he had spent so many happy days, tinged with sadness his ardour to be up and doing for the master whom he had sworn to follow through good and ill report. Each day made it more difficult to him to leave Grace Hewlyn. That the time for doing so must come he knew, and he endeavoured to soothe his feelings by arguing with himself that, after all, the

sacrifice was not really a great one; for if he stayed he would only be able to enjoy the society he had time after time endeavoured to assure himself was but a girl-and-boy friendship. For was not Grace about to become the mistress of Stow Hall, when she would pass out of his life probably for ever? And he, well, did it matter much what happened to him? A few short months ago he would not have troubled his head to answer his own thoughts; now the fact somehow came vividly before him that he would not be able to call his life his own. Did this trouble him greatly? He had experienced a similar sensation before, and had always felt indifferent; but now his mind would wander back to the old days with Grace. Then he would recall their childish rambles through the woods, hand in hand; their rough rides on the pack-horses. He could see the girl clinging to him and laughing in her excitement, as he galloped the old steed at full speed round the meadow. He could hear her merry chatter as they wandered along the hedge-rows, nutting in the autumn, or hunting for birds' eggs in the spring. When these youthful reminiscences rose up before him, he felt that he was endeavouring to assume an indifference he was far from feeling about his quondam playmate. In those days of youth it was Hubert do this, or Hubert do that, and he did it. He was Grace's hero, her patron saint; everything he did was right in her eyes. He was her model of all that was brave and manly. Was it a sin for a boy to love praise when many men, and rulers of men, live on the laudations of their fellows? Then the playmates had parted, and there had followed that long interval of years that in the end brought them together again as man and woman.

The reason for the change in Hubert Annersley

was not far to seek, for during his stay at the Manor he had come to realise the charm of a calm, beautiful home as a contrast to the roving and adventurous life he had been in the habit of leading, He found himself unable to blot out his early recollections; every day some incident occurred to remind him of them; and in a weak moment he had resolved to enjoy as much of his early playmate's society as it was possible with prudence to obtain. But love and prudence do not usually go hand in hand. As the former increases the latter diminishes, until the vanishing point is ultimately reached.

On the particular evening of which we are writing, the long-expected summons that Annersley had been looking forward to with such mingled feelings had arrived, and he was ordered to undertake a journey to London with as little delay as possible. That very night he must bid adieu to his hospitable friends at the Manor. What would Grace say to his sudden going, was his first thought as he wended his way back to the house after giving instructions to the trusty messenger who had brought the news. Should he speak plainly and make a clean breast of everything, and take the consequences of what she might think of him? At any rate, he made up his mind to return to the withdrawing-room where he had left her but a short time previously.

It was nearing the end of April, and the days were lengthening out. Grace was seated at the spinet as he entered and quietly approached her. He was unwilling to make his presence known for fear it might interrupt the song she was singing. Her voice was not a strong one, but mellow, and showed signs of cultivation. Silently he stood and listened to the words as they floated plaintively across the room.

He had often heard her sing this selfsame song before, but to-night it seemed to have a special significance for him—

"Since first I saw your face, I resolved to honour and renown you,
If now I be disdain'd, I wish my heart had never known you.
What? I that loved and you that liked shall we begin to wrangle?
No! No! No! my heart is fast and cannot disentangle."

As Grace finished the last verse she hesitated for a moment, and turned over the leaves of her music as if in doubt whether she should continue or not. Then, apparently deciding, she closed the book, and turned in her seat. Catching sight of Hubert she gave a start, and flushed crimson as she saw that he had been a listener.

"Do you call that proper or fair treatment, sir?" exclaimed Grace, trying to hide her confusion by assuming a vexed tone.

"No; I most humbly apologise," Annersley laughingly replied. "I am always doing something to offend you, fair cousin; now I am an eavesdropper, and fairly caught in the act, and that crime must be added to the other delinquencies of which I spoke this afternoon."

"Would it not be better if you did not make so bold a confession of your vices, sir?" Grace answered, "and you will find, to," she added with a toss of her pretty head, "that folks will not be slow to take you at your word, whereas if you left them to find out your shortcomings it might take them a long time for even you to be estimated at your true worth."

"Peace, Grace, I sue for peace; and I confess myself thoroughly beaten. Let us try to act up to the spirit of the song you were just singing to me,

and not fall out—say for an hour. I would that the peace might last the evening," he added in a tone in which there was no little sadness.

"I sang you no song, sir, and I think the words are mighty foolish," said Grace with an injured air.

"You sang a very foolish song remarkably well, then," answered Annersley as he sat down beside her upon the long music stool, "and as it was not for my benefit, I would he were here for whose it was, so that I might hear you sing it once again."

"He!" answered Grace, with a pout of her pretty lips; "I thought you wanted peace, Hubert, but I fear me if you talk like this there will be no peace between us, fair sir."

"Grace," exclaimed Annersley anxiously, "so be it; but I do ask you to let us be serious for a short time this evening: you may not have the chance again of granting me this small favour. Not that I have any right to expect that you would regret that eventuality, but to-night I must leave your home, it may be never to return. For the sake of old times, of our boy-and-girl love, let this evening live in my memory. I——"

"You leave us to-night?" interrupted the girl, all her bantering manner departing, and an expression of deep sadness clouding her face, "what means your sudden going?"

"Urgent business calls me to depart for London without delay—business of grave importance," he answered.

"Are you in danger, Hubert?" the girl asked, her emotion betraying itself as she laid her trembling hand upon his. "I know you have business in hand, and that you will not trust a woman with its purport. A woman can find out that much, Hubert; but tell me you run no danger," she pleaded.

"I do not wish to deceive you, Grace: there is just an element of danger in it," he replied carelessly.

"O, Hubert, I pray you, pause ere you take any rash steps; it may even now not be too late for you to withdraw from this business," the girl urged, her voice quivering with suppressed emotion.

"Why should I pause, Grace? What is there to deter me from fulfilling my mission?" he replied, as he looked into her eyes. "You even," he added somewhat sarcastically, "would not have me add coward and traitor to my other shortcomings. Then," he continued softly, his whole tone changing, "don't make my duty harder for me to perform than it is. Often and often during my stay with you I have seen the beauty and purity of your life, and my past wandering existence has risen up before me in all its hideous restlessness. Many and many a time when I have thought of our boy-and-girl love, I have been on the verge of confessing to you that it is you, and you alone, who possess the power of changing my life, of making me what some would call an honourable member of society, instead of a wandering outcast. But, Grace, you have given me no word of encouragement, no sign that such a confession would give you pleasure, and I have thought you were right in doing as you did; for one word from you might have caused me to be false to your father's friend, false to my godfather, who, I believe, loves me as a father, and whom I honour and respect as such; false to my vows to the great Duke and his adherents, who rely implicitly upon me, and to whom I have pledged my solemn word, and, above all, false to you, Grace—yes, false," he repeated, as his listener made a movement as if in dissent; "for what right have I, a wanderer, an adventurer, as most people would call me, to think of

love in connection with you. But to be here with you and yours is to be in the midst of one ceaseless feast of love and happiness. No; my duty calls me, and I must return from whence I came, to bask in royal sunshine, where we are alternately gay or sad, according to the whim of the moment; where vice is veiled under the veneer of good breeding; where courtiers fawn and flatter, and sycophants abound; where all is but empty glitter, and true happiness hides its head 'neath an overpowering multitude of shams."

Annersley's emotion caused him to pause for a moment, and Grace endeavoured to prevent the hand he was holding from trembling in his as he continued:

"But through all, Grace, whether I am cushioned in the lap of luxury, or dashed to pieces on the rocks of adversity, I shall never forget you, never," he concluded with vehemence.

"You forgot me once, Hubert," she said; but her tone indicated that it was but a poor attempt upon her part to chide him.

"Never," he exclaimed quickly; "I always remembered you as the toddling maid you were when we two parted; I never pictured you as aught else, nor did I expect to find so wild and merry a child grown into so stately and beautiful a woman." His face was now close to hers, prudence and love were in mortal combat, and prudence, in spite of brave words, was well-nigh vanquished. "Grace," he continued, and there was more tenderness in his tone than his late words warranted, "the past will ever be a sweet remembrance—the brightest spot in my restless life; none can rob me of that."

"No, Hubert," answered the girl sadly; "we can always be friends. No doubt it is all for the best; the life you have described has shown me how unfitted

I am for a Court; it would spoil me; I should not have the strength of will to withstand its allurements. No, Hubert, I shall soon hear of your betrothal to some fair maid who will do you more credit than I, and bring you more honour, too, and I shall pass out of your memory."

"Never to be forgotten, Grace," returned Annersley with warmth, as he looked into her face, "the woman is not born, other than yourself, that I would think of wedding. By my own folly I have been forestalled by Jacob."

"I hope you do not liken me to a mess of pottage," interrupted Grace, with a ghostly attempt at a smile in order to keep back her fast-gathering tears.

"Grace," continued Annersley, too much in earnest to notice her poor attempt at a joke, "whether I am in England, or whether I am in exile, you will not think ill of me for unsettling you? I know full well that before aught else you are a dutiful daughter; let our youthful companionship be ever a memory of the past; think of me but as a wanderer, a ne'er-do-well, one who has no just right to ask any woman's hand in marriage. Before many weeks are gone, aye, even maybe before many days have passed, I may be called a traitor, and meet a traitor's death. Would you think any the worse of me for that, Grace?" he questioned eagerly.

"I could never think ill of you, Hubert, whatever happened," answered the girl tenderly.

"An answer spoken with woman's most ennobling characteristic, trust," exclaimed Annersley enthusiastically. "But would you not alter that opinion, Grace, if you thought me capable of conspiring even against the person of so high and august an individual as the King?"

"You would never conspire, Hubert, unless you thought it was for your country's good," was the girl's confident reply.

"Then it is for the country's good that the great Duke will declare for Faith and Freedom. The whole kingdom will, I believe, rise as one man in so good a cause. If I am wrong I must pay the penalty of my error, but I shall have no little consolation in knowing that you, Grace, will think no worse of me that I fought on the side of what I am convinced to be right and justice. Forgive me for speaking my heart to you, dear; but I could not bear to leave you thinking that I, above all men, had forgotten you. Sing me that song again, dearest, ere I go," pleaded Annersley. "Then will I bid adieu to your good father and mother, for it grows late, and I must delay no longer."

Grace could not find it in her heart to refuse this request, but she dallied with her music so that she might compose her feelings. At length she commenced, her voice showing the emotion under which she was labouring. Soon, however, the beauty of the words and music enthralled her, and she sang that song with a depth of feeling she had never before shown. As the last notes of the melody were wafted away, the singer dropped her hands dejectedly on the keys of her instrument, and gave vent to a choking, half-stifled sob that she could no longer restrain.

Annersley, who had been watching the every movement of the woman he loved, rose hastily, and taking her listless hand, pressed it fervently to his lips. "Grace," he murmured, his voice husky with emotion, "may God protect you and watch over you, my darling," and then fearing to trust himself any longer in her presence, he hurriedly left the apartment.

When he was gone, Grace remained where he had

of a teasing boy to remain behind. She
Annersley; she would be dull without hir
be nobody now to chide, nobody whc
everything that she said seriously. S
Mark Noble; besides, it was her parents'

The sound of horses' hoofs in the cou
her from her reverie. She might see h
though only for a moment. The thoug
strong tonic; her depression momenta
she rose hastily, and with a light step
great staircase, passed along a corridc
open a window that commanded a vie
along which Annersley must go. A r
indeed for her aching heart; still she fe
satisfaction when, a few moments later,
in the fast-gathering dusk, the figure c
riding along the road which she had be
watching. When she saw him draw r
gave a great bound. Had he chang
Was he going to give up the dangerc
return to her once more? No; he sim
head and took a last, long look in the d
Manor. This last act had for a momer
exhilarating effect on the watcher, foll

watching the spot where she had last seen the figure of the man she loved. Time passed on unheeded; the moon shone brightly, and the stars peeped out in the bright sky overhead.

The hoarse note of a nightjar in the shrubbery opposite recalled Grace from the land of dreams. The night was beginning to get cold, and she shuddered at the chilliness of the air, of which she seemed suddenly to become aware; or maybe, it was the note of ill omen heard by her for the first time that season. The creature must have sought these shores many days earlier than was its usual wont. Was she mistaken? Was it a fancy conjured up by the working of her heated brain? No; there again was the guttural cry of the bird she had been taught to believe robbed the goat of its milk, and brought death to the cattle of the farmer. Yet again the discordant sound rang out in the still night air, and the bird, forsaking the shelter of the laurels, flew into a neighbouring elm.

Grace, unable to bear the strain on her nerves any longer, was about to close the casement when the same sound that had disturbed the bird arrested her attention, causing her to remain rooted to the spot. Her face, upon which the rays of the moon were falling, assumed an ashen pallor, for in the shadow cast by the tree she saw the well-known figure of Sir Mark Noble. He was not alone. A female figure was by his side, her arm entwined about his neck. In an instant Grace recognised her maid, Kate Fletcher. She remained a silent spectator of the scene but a moment. Then quickly recovering herself, she hastened to the seclusion of her chamber and sank on her knees by the side of her bed. But she could not pray; her heart rebelled.

. . . . . .

In the room below sat her father and mother, and the former had more than once inquired the cause of his daughter's absence. At length he observed that the candle had burned two hours and it must be getting late; why did Grace not appear? What was keeping her? And she had not read to him as was her usual custom. He went on in this strain until he became so persistent that at last Mistress Hewlyn had to promise to bring the girl to her father.

"John," she remarked, as she rose from her seat, "I have been thinking you do not deserve to have a daughter."

The nature and suddenness of this observation broke in upon the Squire's reflections, causing him to look up in astonishment, and nearly allow the glass he was about to raise to his lips to slip from his grasp.

"What said you, my wife?" he queried.

"You don't deserve to have a daughter," she repeated with emphasis.

The Squire was accustomed every now and again to these outbursts upon domestic matters, and Mistress Hewlyn on the other hand, was well aware that Squire Hewlyn so far forgot himself sometimes as to be upset about prices or the state of the weather. They both, however, had the happy knack of returning a soft answer on these occasions, so that, in pursuance of the old axiom that says, "It takes two to make a quarrel," these two had always kept free from so singularly unpleasant a state of affairs.

"You are right, my dear; she is far too good for me, like her mother before her," he remarked slyly.

"John, don't be foolish," she retorted. "Tell me now, don't you really know why our Grace has not been with us this evening?"

"My dear!" ejaculated her husband with an astonished air, "how on earth should I know?"

"Then, John, you are more blind than I took you to be; don't you know Captain Annersley has gone?"

"Grace has not gone with him?" cried the Squire with a scared look upon his face.

"No, no," she answered impatiently, with a gesture implying that her husband had again made himself ridiculous. "Captain Annersley is a very nice man," she continued to explain, "but it does not do to have too many nice men dangling about a young woman, and you have encouraged him, John."

"I? my dear; I?" said the Squire with increasing wonder.

"Yes; you encouraged him to stay here far too long, and now, naturally, Grace feels the parting."

The old Squire who had come to the conclusion that he was about to hear something very serious by the tone his wife had adopted, gave vent to a sigh of relief, and laughingly replied:

"Why, my dear, Grace and he were playmates together."

"That is just where you were foolish, my husband, and you, too, of all men who ought to know the danger of two men wooing a single woman."

"A single woman, my dear," interrupted the Squire; "why, whom else would you have them woo?"

"John, you are really very silly to-night," retorted his wife impatiently. "In your case, I suppose you would say it was all the worse for the men. Sometimes, though, the girl suffers, and in this instance, I fear Grace will."

"No danger at all, my love, especially if it turns out as it did in my case, where the right man—I should say the wrong man—was rejected, thank Heaven, other-

wise, my dear, I should not have married you," and the Squire released his wife's hand as he finished making this gallant little speech, and added: "Now, my dear, go and find our daughter, and I will bear your good advice in mind for the future."

Softly opening the door of her daughter's room, Mistress Hewlyn peeped in, and seeing her reclining on the bed, fancied she slept. Bending down the mother softly kissed her child's heated brow, and withdrew as silently as she had entered.

"Dearest mother," sighed the weary girl, "I wonder if you ever had a trouble such as mine? If I could but sleep," she thought; but her eyes were as if seared with a red-hot iron, and tears refused to come to her relief. As the day dawned and Mistress Hewlyn came into her child's apartment and gently drew aside the curtains, Grace, worn out with ceaseless tossing to and fro upon her pillow, had at last relapsed into a troubled slumber.

CHAPTER ELEVENTH — *WHERE CROSS ROADS MEET*

THE state of that much-abused stream, known at the time of our story as the Fleet River, is best described by quoting Ben Jonson's well-known lines on its peculiarities:

> "The sinks ran grease, and hair of meazled hogs,
> The heads, houghs, entrails, and the hides of dogs:
> For, to say truth, what scullion is so nasty
> To put the skins and offals in a pasty?
> Cats there lay divers . . . "

About midway between the bridge crossing the stream (where toll was taken from the country people who brought corn and other produce into the City, and Temple Bar that had been re-erected after its destruction by fire) was a narrow street or court leading down to the Thames. The principal building in this narrow thoroughfare was an inn for the reception of the weary traveller. The entrance to this hostelry was through a narrow, dilapidated gateway; its posts strapped with rusty iron bands; its gates half-covered with sheets of the same metal; whilst from the frieze of a beam, laid cross-wise upon two heavy uprights which stood in the road in front, hung a sign that creaked as it swung to and fro with every passing gust. Neither the sign nor the lettering of the inscription made show of competing with its more pretentious rivals for custom, the "Spotted Dog," and the "Boar's Head," in Fleet Street hard by, for it

simply had plainly written upon it in large black letters:

YOUNG DEVIL TAVERN

and underneath there appeared in smaller capitals "Strong Wines Neat as Imported." Inside the gateway was a yard open to the sky and gradually widening, whilst upon either side a range of brick buildings extended for some little distance, and at the end a house with a stone-coloured, wooden gallery on its first floor formed the fourth side of what was almost a square. The gallery was supported by plain, thick, round pillars of wood, whilst in the balcony itself other pillars of a more slender make supported a sloping tiled roof. From this balcony several articles of personal attire floated in the breeze as evidence of the cleanliness of the inmates, a form of decoration that hardly added to the picturesqueness of the buildings. In the yard itself packages and barrels of merchandise lay strewn about in heaps, which every moment increased in size as the waggons that had just arrived from the country were unloaded of their freights. Two horsemen had just ridden into the yard and dismounted. Having given instructions that their animals should have proper attention, they walked into the tap-room. That one of the riders was known to the master of the inn was apparent, for immediately he saw his guests enter, he gave a few hurried directions for their comfort, and advanced to welcome them.

"Ah, Master Turver, I have come to you again, and I trust your house is not full," said the taller of the two horsemen, addressing the host in a cherry voice.

"No, sir, I shall be proud to make Captain Annersley welcome for as long as he will stay and anyone who is with him," was the respectful rejoinder, and having

inquired of his guests their wishes, he led the way up a narrow staircase, then down a winding and tortuous passage towards a half-open door from which issued smoke and the noise of cracking sticks, indicating that Master Turver's instructions had already been carried out, and that this was the room in course of preparation for the travellers' reception. Host Turver was full of apologies for the unprepared look of the apartment, but Hubert Annersley soon set him at his ease.

"There is one thing more objectionable than a room half filled with smoke from a newly-lighted fire, friend Turver," he observed, "and that is when the fire is out; for then there is the raking out of the cinders, the laying in, the merry clinking of the flint, not forgetting the blowing of the tinder and the fire, all requiring skill and patience, and good lung-power, Turver, and your servant there, judging by his watery eyes and clean face, has all these excellent qualities, and has passed through the coughing stage successfully," he added, laughing.

"Has any person asked for me here, to-day?" he then inquired, carelessly.

"Are you quite sure, Turver?" he repeated, just as his host was about to leave the room upon a negative reply being given.

"Quite, sir."

"All right, friend, then don't forget to bring me the news sheet, for I should like to see what is stirring.

"I can't make out why Disney is not here, Willett, for he is the most punctual and impatient of men. You are sure you told him of the hour we should arrive from Somerset to-day?" he asked of his companion as soon as they were alone.

"Sir, I told him plainly that one or both of us would arrive with the waggons to-day; it was best

to come with them to avoid suspicion," was the answer given in an injured tone.

"Yes, yes, Willett, I knew you would carry out your instructions, and if he does not come by the time we have supped, then we must go to him," Annersley interjected decidedly. "You know his address, I suppose?"

"Not exactly, sir: it's Lambeth; but there should be no difficulty, for anyone could, no doubt, tell us where Disney the printer lives," the other answered. Annersley motioned for silence as he heard the footsteps of the landlord returning.

"Here is the news, sir," said Host Turver, entering the room.

Hubert took the proffered sheet, and scanned its page whilst the table was being laid. "Ah! a proclamation of the King's against duelling!" he exclaimed presently.

"His Majesty will prevent you gentlemen carrying swords next, sir," Turver interpolated.

"The wonderful performing horse," Annersley continued, taking no notice of the interruption.

"I've seen him, sir; 'uman, perfectly 'uman," the host suggested confidentially.

"The horse may be dead by this time, Turver, for this sheet I see, is a fortnight old."

"Yes, sir, the next is out to-morrow. Your supper, sir, is ready."

"All right; thanks. We will help ourselves; don't wait."

"I say, Turver!" Annersley added, as if an afterthought had suddenly struck him, "we may be going out presently, and shall not return, perhaps, until late."

"Yes, sir; I will see to you."

"I cannot understand Disney's absence," Annersley remarked, returning to the subject as soon as the two

were again left to themselves, "for he had a proclamation ready even before we were obliged to skip over to Holland, and it was with the greatest difficulty the boys could restrain him from posting it up, he was so proud of his composition; and now that the time has come, nothing but illness would have stopped his impetuosity. We must see him, and to-night," he added earnestly.

"Well, sir, we can take a boat to Lambeth, and ferret him out."

"Come, then," said Annersley impatiently, as soon as the meal was finished, "let us go whilst there is yet a little of daylight left," and the two rose from their seats, and prepared to start.

"We had best go from Temple Stairs," Willett intimated. Annersley nodded assent, and soon both were in the street, and walking hurriedly in the direction indicated. They shortly after reached the stone arches forming the landing-stage, and were immediately surrounded by the watermen, where they selected a boatman, amidst the jeers and satirical humours of his less favoured companions. The tide was still running up river strongly, and favoured the stalwart rower, who brought all his muscles into play at the promise of an extra crown, and the prospect of a return fare.

"Do you know one Disney, a printer of Lambeth?" Annersley asked, as he saw they were nearing Lambeth Palace.

"No, your worship," the man answered, "but you will find someone on shore who will direct you."

The great river was almost deserted, and it was nearly dark when the boat touched the ferry stairs.

As they leapt ashore, the boatman hailed a loafer who stood with idle curiosity watching the fares disembark. "Do you know Master Disney, the printer?" the

waterman asked. On being thus hailed, the disreputable stranger brightened up at the prospect of business.

"Yes," came the ready response.

"Can you direct us to him?" Annersley interjected. For a moment the man hesitated, a curious expression passing over his face.

"Yes," he said; "but it is a strange request at this time o' night. It be a long way, and mighty dark and lonesome," he added slowly, alternately eyeing the two from head to foot.

"Never mind the darkness," Annersley exclaimed impatiently, as the man showed no inclination to move from the post against which he was leaning, "I will pay you well for your trouble," and suiting the action to the word, he held out some silver by way of encouragement. The man looked at the silver, then at the speaker, but he seemed even now to require time to make up his mind. At length he spoke. "Yes, sir; I'll take 'ee for that if 'ee 'll wait here whilst I get a glim;" and saying this he hurried off towards the nearest house, from which he presently returned with a lanthorn. Having given instructions for the waterman to await their return, Annersley and his companion followed their guide at a respectful distance.

The necessity for the light now became apparent, for the straggling houses round the church were fewer and farther between as the open country was reached, and in a walk of a good mile and more, a windmill, with its great wings looming through the darkness, was the only sign of a habitation.

"Where are the houses?" Annersley asked at last, not liking the company he was in, yet feeling that two armed men would be more than a match for the man in front of them.

"Houses," was the echo-like answer, succeeded by

a harsh, incredulous laugh. "Houses! the only house near here be the Turnpike, and we had best now cover the glim." He proceeded to place a piece of cloth round the none too brilliant light "You see it would be a bit awkward if the pike-keeper axed us any questions," he continued, by way of explaining this strange action. "We be nigh the common now, and will soon be there. Here be the railings, and here be the Effra; mind how you cross the bridge; it be none too wide in the dark." The two men followed their guide until he stopped suddenly and placed the light upon the grass, exclaiming, "There—there be Disney, stark and cold, I reckon."

"What foolery is this, fellow?" Annersley exclaimed fiercely, but his companion clutched him by the arm, and pointed overhead at a dark object that seemed to be swinging from the clouds.

"The gallows, sir," he said in a terrified tone. And there, sure enough, not two yards from them was a massive beam, with something white at the side. Hubert Annersley seized the light and held it up to the post. The white object was a fluttering paper nailed to it. A glance was sufficient; the eyes of the two men read the boldly-printed words,

GOD SAVE KING MONMOUTH.

"Disney's proclamation!" they both gasped in the same breath. A baffled cry of rage escaped Annersley's lips, as his trembling fingers opened the door of the lanthorn; and then he raised the light aloft so that it fell upon the pale and sunken features of the dead man swinging in the rusty chains overhead.

"Good God! it's Disney himself!" he exclaimed aghast.

"That's—him—sir—sure—enough," answered the guide, startled at the effect the sight had had upon his companions "Hanged the day afore yesterday," was

the information he volunteered to the two, who stood gazing upward with faces as pale as the one just above them.

"Poor, poor Disney," Annersley murmured presently. "Let us think, Willett, what is now best to be done."

"I ain't going to think, I be going, for who knows but that someone has seen the glim," the guide exclaimed quickly, taking the light from Annersley's hand, and wrapping the cloth again carefully round the horn. "A friend, perhaps, of yours?" he continued.

"Yes," answered Annersley shortly; "a friend who must not remain there."

"He must remain there to-night, for I be off," was the decided retort; "but if so be you want him buried, I have some mates who will do the job at dusk to-morrow—for gold—for it's a ticklish bit o' work, sir."

"Yes, yes, they must do it, and they shall have gold," Annersley answered abstractedly. Then the two, speaking only occasionally in whispers, followed quickly after the bearer of the light, who had already started at a brisk pace on the way back to the ferry.

"There are two gold pieces for your trouble, and for silence, friend. To-morrow I will meet you here, and if your work is done, I will make it five," Annersley whispered to the man as the river was reached. He then followed his companion into the boat. The tide was ebbing fast. The darkness on the waters did not appear so black to Hubert Annersley as the future seemed to be. He tried to rouse himself by thinking of other things. He thought of Grace Hewlyn, but she, too, was lost to him. Life? What was life to him? He had known Disney when the dead man had been fired with enthusiasm. Revenge! Yes, there was life in that; he had pledged his word to the Duke, and he would keep it, come what might —even the gallows.

CHAPTER TWELFTH

A CONFESSION

EVER since Grace Hewlyn as a little girl had occupied a sleeping apartment of her own, it had been her mother's custom to enter her daughter's chamber and draw aside the curtains to admit the morning light. This custom with time had grown into a habit, until the fond parent looked upon it as a loving duty that her hand, and hers alone, should be the one to lift the veil of night and let in the light of a new-born day upon her child; that her form should be the first those loved eyes should rest upon, and that her lips should be the first to imprint a kiss upon her darling's face.

It was the morning after Hubert Annersley had so unexpectedly left the Manor, and Mistress Hewlyn stood anxiously watching at her daughter's bedside. She had opened the lattice, and a wave of soft spring air, laden with the perfume of countless flowers, floated into the room.

The mother's eye had been quick to detect that all was not as it should be with her child; the disordered coverlet; the tangled hair; the laboured breathing, and, above all, the heavy beads of perspiration that stood on the smooth white brow, all went to prove that something was amiss, and silently the mother took a seat and waited anxiously beside the restless sleeper.

For an hour or more she sat patiently. Twice had the Squire sent up to make inquiries, and twice had Mistress Hewlyn whispered a message that he was not to be anxious, but that it was better Grace should not rise at present. At length the pigeons, robbed of their early morning meal, fluttered on to the window-sill of their young mistress's apartment to remind her that they had been forgotten, and it was the loud cooing of the hungry birds that caused Grace to open her eyes; still she uttered no word, and only looked vacantly at her mother.

"Grace dear," presently said the watcher, rising and bending over the bed, "are you awake?" The girl's lips moved, but no sound came from them. "Grace, Grace," repeated the mother, in a louder and more anxious tone; but still no answering voice, only a deep sigh, a restless turn of the body, and a toss of the head. Then did Mistress Hewlyn realise that her daughter failed to recognise her, that she was ill, dangerously ill perhaps. Seriously alarmed, she hastily summoned her husband to the bedside. The old man leant over his child and kissed her parched lips.

"Grace, my darling, what is it? Are you ill? It is your old father. Answer me, dear one," he murmured, the tone of his voice betraying his agony of mind. But still no word escaped the sufferer's lips, and as she turned restlessly upon her pillow, he looked anxiously at his wife for explanation, as if the poor, distressed mother could give it. Seeing her despair, he quickly whispered a few words of comfort ere he left the room to dispatch a servant on the fleetest horse to summon the surgeon, who resided at a distance of some six miles from the Manor. In the meantime, pending the arrival of the doctor, Mistress Hewlyn prescribed and administered such homely

remedies as seemed to her and the frightened household to meet the case.

It appeared ages to the anxious watchers ere the welcome sound of horses' hoofs was heard, heralding the approach of the looked-for aid. Eagerly they scanned the face of the doctor, from whom so much was expected, as he hurriedly made his way through the knot of frightened servants gathered in the vicinity of their young mistress's room to be in readiness to hear the first tidings of the great man's opinion of the case. For a moment he stood by the sick girl's bedside watching her face; then he applied the usual tests in such cases. "A high fever," he said presently in answer to their anxious inquiries. Afterwards he proceeded, with no little impressiveness, to kill or cure the sufferer in the then orthodox manner by cupping.

The doctor had a kindly face, and although his manner was brusque in the extreme, it not only inspired confidence, but commanded obedience. His prescription for the patient was a very simple one—perfect rest and quiet, and it is needless to say that his order was strictly adhered to.

It might have been the blood-letting, or his advice, or both, or it might have been the natural vigour and youth of his patient, that worked a change for the better; but perhaps it would be unwise to hazard an unqualified opinion on the subject. Let it suffice to say that Grace's condition materially improved under the medical man's assiduous attention, an attention for which the Squire and Mistress Hewlyn felt they could never be grateful enough; and when on the third day he was able to pronounce their daughter out of danger, the faces of the two betrayed what a heavy load had been lifted from their hearts.

It was about seven or eight days after Grace had been taken ill, and although the rule of strict quiet was still virtually adhered to, most of the members of the household had seen and spoken to their young mistress. There was, however, some slight excuse for this deviation from the doctor's orders, as the Squire and his wife had spent six days and nights of ceaseless watching at their daughter's side, and the severe strain had told its tale. Now that she was pronounced out of danger, and the crisis was passed, they both felt the want of rest. Thus it was that others in turn took their watch; and on this particular afternoon in question Kate Fletcher happened to be on duty at Grace's bedside. Kate was engaged in bobbin work to pass away the hours of watching, and her charge, who had just awakened from a refreshing slumber, lay gazing at the busy hands of her nurse as she cleverly manipulated the threads.

"Kate," said Grace, almost in a whisper, breaking in upon the silence, "you are very pretty, child."

"Me, Miss Grace?" answered the girl, looking up from her work with a surprised expression on her face at the suddenness of the remark. But as her patient did not resume the conversation she returned once more to her bobbins.

Grace had turned her head to the window, and was to all appearance looking out into the sunlight; but in reality her mind was fixed on that night, the night before her illness, when Hubert Annersley had unmistakably shown her that he had not forgotten their boy-and-girl love, and had even, she thought, as she called his words to mind, given her to understand that his love had grown as he had grown, and was no longer the love of a child for a child, but of

a man for a woman. Had she shown him, too, the state of her affections? Strange as it might seem, she could recall all he had said to her, but her own words to him she strove in vain to remember.

She called to mind, with a sudden strange feeling at her heart, that this man had left her on a dangerous mission; he himself had said perhaps they might never meet again. Then he would never know how she loved him, she thought, and a look of unutterable sadness stole over her face upon which illness had left evident traces. She recalled how she had stood at the casement in the gallery, and had watched him ride away. How her heart thrilled with a vain hope as he had halted and turned his head in her direction! How she had struggled to prevent herself from crying aloud as he had once more resumed his way and disappeared in the darkness! And even whilst she was endeavouring to forget that this man had ever crossed her path again, and was schooling herself to believe that she was destined to be another's, the moonlight had revealed to her the figure of the very man who was in her thoughts, making love, yes, making love to the girl who was now sitting beside her, her servant, her rival. In vain she tried to argue the matter out; it was useless, she could not. Her whole nature revolted at the baseness of the man who was her chosen lover. The only conclusion she came to was, that one was a love she would never accept, whilst she felt that perhaps the other might never be proffered, and so her thoughts rambled on, and no sound was heard in the room save the click of the bobbins as they fell one upon the other, or the hum of a busy bee as it flew in at the window and left hastily, almost apologising for the mistake it had made.

"Is it long to the Maying?" said Grace at length

breaking the silence, her eyes still fixed on the waving trees in the sunlight outside.

"No, mistress," answered the other; "it will be here in two days' time."

"Ah, how I should like to see you, Kate!" continued her mistress, with a sigh; "but I suppose I must lie here and hear of your triumph from my father. He will be sure to tell me of all the grand doings." The hands of the girl at her side trembled visibly as she kept her eyes fixed on her work, and Grace continued: "It grieves me, Kate, that I have been unable to help you with your gown, but my good mother has done that, has she not?"

"No, Mistress Grace, I am not going to be Queen," answered Kate, still keeping her eyes rigidly fixed on the bobbins; and then, as an afterthought, she added quickly: "I should not think of leaving you to go a-Maying."

"Oh, but you must, Kate," said the invalid to her attendant with more energy than she had yet displayed. "Why, I have watched you ever since you were a baby in arms; you cannot call that to mind, I trow?" continued Grace, smiling. "But mayhap you can call to mind how, when you were a little older, I was always finding my way to the Mill, and thereby adding much to my good mother's anxiety, as she always used to fancy I had been stolen by gypsies, while in truth I had but run over to your aunt Swaine's to play the mother to you. I cannot let my protégée miss the opportunity that comes not to every girl to be heralded as the prettiest and purest maid in all the country round. It would make me unhappy if I thought my sickness stood in your way. Go, call my mother, for I must have this righted now."

Poor Kate showed no desire to obey her young mistress's commands, but her flushed and averted face betrayed her agitation, and her eyes filled with tears.

"Quick, child, and do my bidding," added the sick girl peevishly; "you waste time."

"I durst not be Queen, mistress Grace; don't make me, oh, don't!" answered Kate, in a voice choked with emotion. "My heart will break," she sobbed, as she buried her face in her hands; "my heart will break."

"Why, you silly little goose, you should be proud to be fêted and made much of. Go now, and fetch my mother."

But the only answer was a heartrending sob.

"What ails you, child?" said Grace kindly, as she stretched out a thin, white hand towards the weeping girl.

"Mistress Grace, a Queen must be good, you said. I am not good, I am not pretty; I am wicked and ugly. Oh! don't touch me," said the sobbing girl, shrinking from Grace; "I am not fit to be touched by such as you."

"Wicked! not fit to be touched!" repeated her mistress in astonishment.

"Yes, Mistress Grace, wicked," reiterated Kate, as she cast a frightened look round the apartment, evidently in fear that somebody might be listening. "Hush, mistress, don't be angry with me," continued the grief-stricken girl. "I am going to marry Sir Mar——, Sir Mar——" It was useless, she could not give utterance to that awe-inspiring name, although she had said it to herself in the solitude of her own room a hundred, nay, a thousand times. She might, even now, perhaps, have blurted it out had she not

caught the look that came over her mistress's face as Grace half raised herself upon the pillow, and leaned forward towards her now frightened companion.

"Tell me, child, has Sir Mark promised you this?" she asked in a voice hoarse with emotion, as she stretched out her hand and clutched that of the trembling maid.

"Yes, oh yes, mistress," Kate answered, again covering her face with her hands, as if she feared to meet the other's searching glance; "and he must keep his promise," she added excitedly, "he cannot break his word, he cannot; no, he cannot do that," and again she burst into tears.

Grace for a moment watched the weeping girl, and a look of pain came over her face as she sank back on her pillow, exhausted with the effort she had made. She could not fathom the baseness of this man upon whom she had been taught to look as her accepted suitor. Was she dreaming, as she had dreamt during those weary hours that had caused her father and mother so much anxiety? No, it was all true; for there sat Kate, vainly endeavouring to stifle her sobs, and dry the tears from those large dark eyes of hers. Besides, had she not seen this very girl in the arms of the man who paid court to her, Grace Hewlyn? As her eyes wandered round the room, they rested on a small table in the corner, upon which stood a bowl of choice spring flowers. They were flowers that he had that day sent her. Then her eyes sought the girl again. Whom was he going to deceive—mistress or maid? No, she argued to herself, he could not mean it; her parents and Lady Malda must be mistaken as to Sir Mark's intention. He had never actually asked her to wed,

although his actions could mean naught else. No: he had never asked her, and she had heard of gentlemen falling in love with those occupying humble positions in life. She repeated Kate's words to herself; what should she do? Her father and mother wished her to marry this man who had stepped between herself and Hubert Annersley, she thought bitterly; and if he had played Kate false, could she disobey the only beings she cared for in the world? If she obeyed them, what was to become of this poor girl? Should Sir Mark ask her to be his wife and she refused, could she give her mother her reason for doing so? "I must think, think," she murmured to herself as she passed her hand wearily over her brow, "how to hide my mortification and this girl's shame." If she could but foresee. After all, perhaps she was mistaken in Sir Mark; he might mean honourably by her maid; who could tell? time alone.

"Kate," exclaimed Grace in an anxious tone, "do you really think Sir Mark will wed you?"

"I scarce know, mistress. When he is with me I feel sure he will be true; but when he is away, and I think of the grand ladies he meets and the gallant gentleman he is, my heart misgives me. Then I am afeard at times he is ashamed of me; but please, mistress," she exclaimed in the most supplicating tones, "don't betray me. Mother would kill me —and Jack——" she stopped abruptly, as if she had for the first time contemplated what his wrath might be.

"Kate," said Grace gently, speaking with an effort, "fear not, child; your confidence is safe in my keeping. You cannot be Queen, but you must go to the Maying all the same; it will do you good

to be merry once again, and moreover, 'twill please your mother to see you there." A great sorrow entered Grace Hewlyn's soul as she looked at the sweet young face at her side, and thought of the happy hours they had spent together as children. "Come here, child," she said softly; "I should like to kiss you." While Kate bent down over her young mistress, her heart felt as if it were about to break. Grace was conscious of a scalding tear on her hand as she gently kissed the woebegone little face.

"Darken the room, child," said the invalid wearily, "I would sleep awhile; but ere you go, remove that bowl of flowers—their perfume oppresses me."

CHAPTER THIRTEENTH

MAY-DAY

REACTION was rife throughout England against the strict *régime* of Puritanism inaugurated by the Commonwealth, and which did not entirely spend its force until long after the Restoration had taken place. Still, in many districts all kinds of amusements were tabooed. Even soul-stirring music, whether used to assist in divine worship, or to add to the Terpsichorean pleasures of the more light-hearted and light-footed members of the community, was distorted into an invention of the Evil One, and every species of merriment was under the ban of these bigoted rulers as having a tendency to assist in some unaccountable manner Popish superstitions, which, by the great bulk of the population of England, were looked upon as an abomination not to be tolerated.

> "And harmless May-poles were rail'd upon
> As if they were the towers of Babylon."

The town of Bridgewater was *en fête;* the streets were crowded, and the sounds of music, mingled with the voices and laughter of the dancers, testified strongly to the fact that the reaction of this May-day was not only rife, but complete at all events. The entire population of the town and surrounding villages and hamlets was holding high holiday, which made the scene in the vicinity of the Cross a merry as well as an imposing

one, to which the gaily-dressed lads and lasses lent an amount of colour and animation truly pleasing to all beholders. Countless bright flags and pennons fluttered lazily in the gentle breeze as they hung from the windows and roofs of the houses, whilst many-hued ribbons of every imaginable tint entwined the poles decorated with branches of evergreens that had been raised at intervals along the streets, and that also protruded from many of the casements in the upper storeys of the houses. The day, which had been long as well as merry, a ceaseless round of mirth and enjoyment, was now wellnigh spent, yet to look at the moving throng, it appeared to have been none too long for the majority of those zealous revellers.

The older and more sedate members of the community, who had during the day become imbued with the merriment that was prevalent, had ceased or were thinking of ceasing their revels, tired out for the most part with watching the antics of the mummers around the gaily decorated May-pole, or wearied, as they well might be, by the previous night's vigil, for the pole had been brought into the town, and elevated with all due ceremony almost before the dawn had fairly broken. Then had the women folk, both young and old, sought the nearest meadows in order to bathe their faces in the early morning dew, a performance that they all devoutly believed would not only impart, but sustain their beauty for an indefinite time, and the neglect of which might render the transgressor liable to wrinkles and grey hairs at no very distant period. A harmless and simple custom withal, but only imagined to lead to beneficial effect when performed on this particular day. If primitive, it had the advantage of being a less hurtful beautifier than the pungent concoctions of the present day, the effectiveness of which for the most part lies in

the fact that they are usually named in some too original and incomprehensible tongue.

Bacchus had on this occasion found many votaries among the sterner sex, causing the limbs of the same to become less active as time wore on. With most of this section the loss of power in their nether extremities was amply compensated for by the increase of it in their vocal organs. But others, from sheer weariness, no doubt, had sought the shelter either of the "Swan" or the "Lamb," that they might indulge in a short yet soothing repose ere they bent their steps in a homeward direction. The sleepers, however, were in the minority in the kitchen of the "Lamb," or perhaps quicter quarters had been found elsewhere for them, for this useful apartment, which served the purpose of the ordinary reception room of the inn, contained a motley crowd of dancing and singing guests, the scraping of a fiddle and blowing of a pipe adding considerably to the confused din and clamour. Let it be recorded that the worthy instrumentalists had commenced the day with the souls of musicians, but both bowing and blowing have their limitations even with the true artist, and art had some hours previously been cast to the winds, and the dance music had degenerated into a mere trial of physical endurance between the pair who were perched upon a couple of stools placed on a large oak table at the end of the room. Sometimes the pipe and sometimes the fiddle had the better of the contest, yet the dancers heeded not the squeaking of the stringed instrument, nor the reed's dyspeptic notes, but lightly tripped it amidst the plaudits of an admiring and easily pleased group of spectators. John Coombs was there in all his glory as host. Sitting in the corner of a high-backed settle, he grasped the bowl of a broken pipe that but a short

time previously he had proudly and determinedly loaded with the fragrant weed, and puffed at contentedly as he surveyed the lively scene before him. His ear for music had evidently been the cause of the mishap to his pipe, and still even threatened to occasion its ultimate destruction, for he continued to sway to and fro the hand containing the remnant, doubtless under the impression that he was marking the measure both for dancers and musicians. His eyes were closed as if in serene enjoyment of the exquisite melody, and his head wagged from side to side, whilst the hand that was not engaged in beating time grasped the empty leathern mug. Close to his uncle, with his broad back to the almost fireless hearth, stood Jack Swaine. Though not dancing, his eyes were fixed on the graceful figure of Kate Fletcher as she laughingly followed her partner down the human line just formed in the centre of the room in the figure of a dance that somewhat resembled "Sir Roger de Coverley." Her dark hair was hanging in a dishevelled mass down her back; her pale face was flushed with the exertion she had gone through during the day. As for Swaine, he had no thought or eyes for anyone else in the room. His face wore a grave look. Only once it lighted up with a smile when old Jim Croad and Kate created a diversion in the noisy throng by reason of Croad's inability to raise his hand to join that of his partner so that the dancers might pass underneath. The wounded smuggler made a wry face, and then gave up the attempt, which only added to the merriment of the onlookers. Jim Croad was in the habit of taking all his amusements seriously, in fact in much the same manner as a mute would delight in a well-attended funeral.

Mistress Coombs was in another room, as busy as any living soul could possibly be, serving a clamour-

ing bevy of thirsty carousers. She was getting very tired of all the noise and shouting, and had several times sent messages for assistance to her erring helpmate. Thoroughly exhausted at last, the good creature went in search of him herself. It was with difficulty that she made her way into the kitchen through the crowded doorway.

"Jan," said the hostess, giving the partner of her choice a dig of no little force in the chest, "why doan't 'ee give a help up?" The only visible effect of her words was to make John drop the mutilated remains of his pipe, and half open his eyes. But no sooner did they rest on his better half, than he instantly closed them again, and commenced to wave his mug in the air, and wag his head violently from side to side, one beat behind the piper. This, by-the-bye, was of no consequence, as at that period the fiddle led the pipe at least a couple of bars in the trial of endurance.

"Jack," said his aunt, turning to her nephew in despair, "tell Kate to gi' me a hand at t' sarvin.'" Jack cast a look at his cousin's eager young face, sparkling as it was with happiness, and he could not find it in his heart to break in upon her pleasure.

"I'll gi' 'ee a hand, aunt," he said, "vor it be not long avore we must go, and zee she be tripping it lighter 'an any maid, an' be enjoying herself right merrily."

"A lazy minx," replied his aunt sourly; "she only be happy when she be wi' the lads. The maids be much bolder 'an when I was a lass; we had to work, lad, an' not hop about as zo many Merry Andrews."

"Coom," said Jack, anxious to get his aunt out of the room, for fear she might disturb Kate, "they be callin' vor 'ee," and the pair left the dancers, and soon the noisy customers ceased their clamour.

It was nearly an hour later, when Jack Swaine

again entered the kitchen. It so happened that there was a momentary lull in the hubbub; the orchestra were making the most of the interval for refreshment, and were eagerly taking in fuel to aid them in the race that would presently recommence. John Coombs' exertions as conductor had evidently proved beyond his strength; his head had sunk on his breast, and the nature of his breathing could in no wise be described by the word gentle. Kate Fletcher was seated gazing regretfully at the musicians, as if grudging them their well-earned repose.

"Kate," said Jack, approaching his cousin, "it be time to go, lass, an' t' cart be at t' door."

A look of disappointment crept over the girl's face, as she peered through the ill-glazed windows, as if doubting his word.

"I'll be with you soon, Jack," she said, and she reluctantly left the room. Jack's eyes were not the only ones that followed the retiring figure. More than one young heart would have paid yeoman's ransom to drive Kate home that evening to Heathercombe Manor.

Mistress Coombs was at the door to witness the departure of her daughter and nephew. Her face had lost all its accustomed look of ill-temper and sternness; her nephew had evidently put her in a good humour, for she kissed her daughter fondly, despite the fact that it was but an hour ago she had thought fit to describe her as a minx. She also busied herself placing parcels of cakes, sweetmeats, and what might have been articles of attire in the cart, giving separate and distinct instructions with each package, which she enjoined Kate to give to her sister at the Mill. At length all being ready, Swaine touched his horse lightly with the whip, and it was not many minutes before the pair were lost to the sight of the lovesick

lads, who had crowded to the door of the inn to witness their departure.

The joyfulness of youth is a spirit added to flame, and Kate was full of happiness. She had thrown all her troubles on one side for that day, and had made up her mind to appreciate to the full everything that came in her way. She even enjoyed the jolting of the springless cart, and for an hour she chatted away to her cousin about the events of the day, laughing as she recounted the antics of the mummers, asking Jack a hundred and one questions, and answering them herself before he had time to do so. Poor Jack was very abrupt when he was not silent. He had so many things to think about just then, that even when Kate became enthusiastic about the gaily bedecked cattle, with their horns tipped with silver and gold, which she had seen led round the town in the morning, he did not show a kindred enthusiasm for their well-formed outlines as he had done at another period of the day. Still, he answered her, which was sufficient inducement for her to chatter on. When she had finished with the fun of the clowning, she became personal, and made sport of the solemnity of old Jim Croad, or of the dancing of a rival; but nothing seemed to rouse her companion. At last tired out, she relapsed into silence. So they jogged along, neither speaking except at intervals, when Swaine would address to the horse a loud "wugg-er," "wugg-on," or "wugg-off," as he desired the animal to go quickly, or to turn to the right or to the left.

"Kate," he said after a long interval of silence, "why were 'ee not Queen?"

His question was so abrupt and unexpected that the girl visibly started, and the colour left her cheeks. She had been rudely awakened to the realities of life,

and water had been thrown upon the flame of youth.

"I tell 'ee, Jack, I would rather be free to enjoy myself than be dressed up so that I should be afeared to move lest I might tumble the flowers or spoil my dress. Jenny made a sweet Queen, didn't she, Jack?" she continued, as if she wished to change the subject, and all the time she was speaking to her cousin she kept her face averted. Jack was not slow to observe this, and mistook the cause. It gave him a courage he had never before possessed, for he took the little white hand that was so near to his and held it, making it look quite lost in his great palm.

"Kate," he whispered, "I'll be able to gi' 'ee a gran' weddin' gown." Then as Kate did not answer, and still kept her face from him, he grew bolder, "An' you shall ride to church like a lady, lass," he stammered in a coaxing manner as if by way of further inducement, whilst he peered anxiously into her face; but she only grew paler and hung her head.

"The hosses be mine, an' I've saved a tidy bit." Still no answer. "Will 'ee wed me, Kate?" There was a long pause, during which Jack looked even more uncomfortable than his companion. He could feel her hand trembling in his own, and he could hear her laboured breathing.

"Will 'ee wed me, lass?" he repeated; "I be goin' vor a soldier."

For an instant the girl looked up into his face as she spoke for the first time. "What do you mean, Jack? you a soldier?" she said in a low voice.

"Yes, Kate, I be a-goin' to help the great Duke get his lawful rights. Captain Annersley du zay as 'e 'ell be righted an' I be goin' to zerve under his banner. But," he added, as he observed her look of alarm,

"there'll be no vighting, lass. The Captain du zay as t' whole country 'll rise zo like one man to welcome him vrom vurrin parts, zo like as they done when I vollowed him roun' the country avore. Zay 'ee love me, Kate," he exclaimed with increased vehemence, his voice quivering with emotion, "zay 'ee 'll wed me."

"Oh, Jack," she faltered at last, "I like you very, very much; but I can never be thy wife."

"Ne-ver—can—w-e-d—me, Kate," he said slowly as one in a dream. "Did 'ee zay that, lass? did 'ee zay that?" and there was a depth of sadness in his tone which touched the heart of the girl at his side.

"Yes, Jack dear, don't hate me," she replied, "and for the love of God don't ask me why if you really love me. Jack, don't ask me that; promise you won't," and in her agitation she threw her arms round his neck and burst into tears.

This was too much for the poor fellow.

"No, lass, I 'ont ask 'ee why," he murmured as he slowly disentangled her arms from his neck. It was lucky that the old horse knew his way, or there is no saying where the pair might have found themselves: not that either cared at that moment.

The girl felt greatly relieved by his promise, but the tears continued to course down her cheeks. These were the two who had only that morning driven into the town with light hearts, and with the pleasures of a bright May-day before them. How different was their return with their minds weighed down with sorrow, their future a blank, through the darkness of which neither had the strength or courage to endeavour to pierce! The horse jogged on, and the evening shadows closed in upon them, utterly regardless of their joys and sorrows—Nature's warning to the world to close its eyes in sleep. Once the animal,

taking advantage of its master's indifference, almost came to a standstill. Then Swaine reminded him that he was not asleep, but his "wugg-er" was uttered in a strangely thick and discordant voice. It served his purpose, however, for the horse started into a brisk trot.

CHAPTER FOURTEENTH

A REFUSAL

A MONTH had quickly flown since May-day. Yet, in those primitive times, so few and far between were the occasions when people in the humbler spheres of life had opportunities of meeting together to enjoy themselves, that its memory still remained the chief theme of conversation among the country-folk, and was likely to do so until the time arrived to make preparation for the next great festival.

May had seen the pasture land of Somerset at its best, and the early days of June saw the yeomen busy gathering in the rich crop of hay destined to replenish the empty staddles in the rickyards. The drought of the previous summer, followed by a severe winter, had helped to deplete them in a manner never before known, even in the memory of the oldest inhabitant. Squire Hewlyn's well-tended meadows had yielded, like his neighbours', a heavy shear of grass; his labourers were completing their task, and the last load was being carried in to finish the third huge stack that had risen in the yard during the last few days. Grace was sitting at her window, watching the heavily-laden carts pass on their way backwards and forwards to the fields to fetch a load, that she continually said to herself must be the last.

The past two or three weeks had been very weary

ones for her, as she was still treated by all the inmates of the Manor as hardly convalescent. The past gentle month had done much to bring the roses back to her cheeks, in spite of a mind that was sorely troubled. Not a word of Hubert Annersley had yet reached the Manor since the day of his hasty departure, though the old Squire, thinking to interest and amuse his daughter, had imparted to her all the news he could gather during his visits to Taunton and Bridgewater.

It was not the gossip or scandal of these towns the girl cared one jot about. She hungered for news of any movement on the part of the people against the king, in which the man who had now found such a place in her thoughts, and who had cast such a spell over her existence, might be taking an active part. Her father, in his anxiety to afford her gratification, had quite unintentionally given her enough information on the subject to keep her in a fever of suppressed excitement and unrest.

The Earl of Argyle had landed in Scotland with an armed force (the Squire had at first told Grace) and the "Fiery Cross" had been sent forth to summon the Campbells to arms. Gentlemen and commoners had alike flocked in their thousands round the standard of the MacCallum More, at which news His Majesty and the Parliament were sorely troubled. The Duke of Monmouth, so it was currently reported, contemplated leaving his retreat in Holland, and landing in England, accompanied by an armed expedition. The movements of both the Earl and the Duke were part of a well-planned scheme, so thought the Squire, to overthrow the King and to re-establish the Commonwealth.

To which party Hubert Annersley had attached

himself, Grace knew not, but she felt she was a sufficient judge of his character to be sure that wherever he was, he would be impatient to lead. Days passed without the Squire being able to furnish his daughter with additional information as to any actual attempt on the part of the Duke or Earl that would confirm her views of the storm-clouds she made sure were gathering.

Hubert Annersley had forgotten her as he had done once before. The very thought caused a depression to steal over Grace, that each day seemed to increase in its intensity. She could do nothing, could think of nothing to bring her any lasting relief. On the contrary, as time went on and rumour was beginning to give place to fact, her despair increased. Doubts were cast upon the first news of the Earl's triumphant progress and successes in Scotland, as well as upon the numbers and enthusiasm of his followers. Stories of mutinies, defeats, and retreats, now gained as much credence as those of his previous victories had done.

Grace pondered all these matters in her mind as she sat at the window of her room.

"Grace, dearest," said Mistress Hewlyn, entering the room, "Sir Mark has come over from the Hall and would like to be allowed to see you. Will you see him this time, my child? Methinks you have treated him with but scant courtesy in refusing to do so ere this," concluded the speaker as she imprinted a kiss on her daughter's forehead.

This announcement was not unexpected by the girl, for Sir Mark had been assiduous in his attention to her during her illness, himself bringing flowers and inquiring daily after her; yet she had not seen him. Each day she anticipated his visit with a

secret dread, and each day she had made some excuse for putting him off. She knew in her own mind that the day of meeting must come sooner or later; but the delay seemed to give her courage, as after each successful effort to postpone the inevitable, she made up her mind to grant him the interview on the morrow, and give him her answer to the question she knew full well he would put to her at their first meeting. Could she to-day obtain a further reprieve? the girl wondered, as she rose and returned her mother's affectionate greeting somewhat hysterically.

"Will you always love me, mother dear, whatever happens?" she asked in a strange, anxious tone.

"Of course, child, of course I shall," said Mistress Hewlyn, soothingly, a look of distress passing over her countenance as she noticed her daughter's agitation. "But," she continued, "you must not allow yourself to be agitated, for remember, dear girl, Sir Mark is no stranger to you."

"And you and father will promise not to be angered with me if I behave very badly to you both; for I have always been a self-willed daughter, mother dear, haven't I?" she whispered coaxingly, as she affectionately kissed her parent.

"Tut, tut, child, I can assure you that your father will forgive you anything. But I cannot answer for myself," said the mother playfully.

Grace glanced at the speaker as if to make sure that the tone did not belie the look, and she saw that her mother had meant to give the same answer as had been given for her father.

She threw her arms round her mother's neck and kissed her long and passionately, then with determination she said:

"I will go and see him now, mother," and left the room hurriedly as if fearing she might repent of her sudden resolution.

Sir Mark who had, a little impatiently perhaps, been striding up and down the withdrawing room, stood gazing out of the window. There was something in his manner denoting a confidence that success with fair women is apt to beget. He was not at all anxious as to the ultimate result of his visit to the Manor. Hubert Annersley had vanished from his path as suddenly as he had stepped into it, and he had assured himself that Kate Fletcher would not now stand in his way. She might be a source of annoyance to him, but nothing more. Grace, if she ever did come to hear of this little indiscretion, which was extremely improbable, would doubtless follow the rule of her sex, and prefer a sinner to a saint: such at least had been his experience of womankind in general. Perhaps she was a trifle religious, but what of that, he thought to himself with a smile; he would have little difficulty in overcoming the proud girl's Puritanical scruples with the persuasive powers he had at his command. He liked her vivacious but modest manner; it was a combination to which he was a stranger, and gave him pleasure accordingly. Would she be much changed by her late illness? he was wondering to himself, when the door opened, and the subject of his thoughts entered.

A hurried glance assured him that his fears had been groundless. Grace Hewlyn's beauty was unimpaired. There she stood, a slight flush overspreading her face and effectually hiding any trace her lengthy confinement to the house might have left behind. He was for once in his life sincere when he exclaimed with a

courtly bow—"By my troth, Mistress Grace, but you are looking more beautiful than ever." Then followed inquiries as to her health, all of which were interlarded with verbal shafts of no mean polish. Grace responded to his bow with quiet dignity, but to his compliments and inquiries she replied somewhat wearily, and, she thought, awkwardly; but her suitor was not of the same opinion. He offered her his hand to conduct her to a seat.

The position was a little more embarrassing for the wooer than he had anticipated. Now that he was face to face with the girl, he felt some diffidence in speaking, neither did her manner tend to aid him in what he had looked upon as an easy task.

"Your mother has doubtless informed you of the object of my visit, Mistress Grace?" he exclaimed after a somewhat awkward pause in the conversation.

"No, Sir Mark. She has told me naught save that you wished to speak with me."

"I am glad that it is so," returned Sir Mark airily. "It better pleases me that what I have to say to you should pass through no third channel, but come direct, for I am here, Grace, to ask you to be my wife."

The girl looked at the speaker with a half frightened, half contemptuous air as he continued:

"This can come as no surprise to you, sweet lady, for you know full well that I have loved you now for many months past, and that the little I have to offer, my name, and my fortune, I would willingly share with you."

Sir Mark spoke these words with genuine feeling, and he paused to see the impression they made on the hearer. Taking her hand with the art of a courtier, he pressed it to his lips as he continued: "I would

have you consent, fair Mistress Grace, to share my lot and become the mistress of Stow Hall."

Grace remained silent, feeling that she would like to fly from the room now that the moment she had been anticipating, dreading, for days past, had really come. She must be brave, she thought, but it was with a very tremulous voice she answered: "I feel honoured that you should offer to make me mistress of Stow Hall. But, sir, in all humility, I must decline, for I can never be your wife, Sir Mark Noble, never," she concluded decidedly.

Her answer so took her suitor by surprise, that he rose, an angry flush dyeing his cheek.

"Am I to understand then that you decline my offer?"

Grace answered him gently, but firmly. "Sir, you must not think me ungrateful, or lacking in appreciation of the honour you would confer upon me, but I cannot, I cannot consent to be your wife."

Sir Mark was a man who was not easily defeated when he had laid himself out to captivate a woman. Yet for a moment he felt nonplussed; he was so totally unprepared for the turn events had taken; all was so different to what he had anticipated.

"You are, of course, free to choose a husband;" he proceeded, looking the girl full in the face, as a suspicion flashed across his mind.

"Yes," replied Grace slowly, for she had not taken into consideration the possibility of Sir Mark's questioning her.

"Then may I presume to ask whether I have a rival?" he asked with a scornful curl of his lip.

"You have no rival, Sir Mark; and I would that you pressed me no further upon the subject," returned Grace with dignity.

"I would not press you, fair lady, did I not think your answer belied the circumstances of your refusal. Until you tell me that I have a rival, I shall feel free to press you to reconsider your answer to me, an answer, I fear, given without due consideration," concluded Sir Mark in a tender tone, bending towards her.

"I would beg of you, Sir Mark," she urged with agitation, "not to pursue a course that would but cause me pain, and would lead you to think that I am not grateful for the honour you have done me."

"Have I then a rival?" he persisted, at a loss to understand how any girl could possibly refuse his offer, unless his question was answered in the affirmative.

"You have no rival, sir," Grace repeated, her temper rising; "I would you could say the same to me."

She had said in her anger words she had never meant to utter. She immediately felt the mistake she had made. Her face flushed scarlet, she became confused. This interview with Sir Mark, gone through over and over again in the seclusion of her chamber, had from the first taken a turn that she had never contemplated, and she knew not what to say or do.

Sir Mark was not slow to see that he had the advantage over her, and to act upon it, on the supposition that perhaps jealousy was, after all, the cause of her refusal.

"One so fair can have no rival," was his hasty retort. "I would that you informed me whom you fancy I could possibly prefer to you; by gad! it would be worth a king's ransom to see the lady. But come now, I have been frank with you, be frank with me, fair Mistress Grace, and tell me, have I a rival?"

Kate Fletcher's tear-stained face rose up before the

girl as he was speaking, she could think of naught else, so that she only slightly varied her previous answer.

"Pray, sir, let us not pursue a subject that is so distasteful to me," answered Grace, with so much determination in her tone that she was surprised at her own temerity.

Sir Mark was not accustomed to be treated in this fashion by a woman, and his temper overcame his judgment as he remembered what Kate Fletcher had told him. "There is truth in what I have heard: it is this man Annersley who stands between us," he cried savagely.

"I know not who could have told you that," stammered Grace, quite taken aback by the changed position. She thought for the moment she had let slip something she meant to keep secret from Sir Mark, and thus enabled him to pursue his attack on her. "It could not be Hubert Annersley, for he at least is a gentleman who would not spread a report that he knew was not true," she added angrily, the bare idea of the man she loved being guilty of such an act causing her indignation to rise. But her manner only tended to confirm Sir Mark's suspicion, and her pointed reference to Annersley being a gentleman provoked him still further.

"A gentleman!" he exclaimed scornfully, "a gentleman forsooth, who, if all had their deserts, would be hanged, drawn, and quartered, and his traitorous head exposed on Temple Bar, as a warning to the scum who would, like him, plot against my lord the King, and assist such fellows as the Earl of Argyle, or that bastard Monmouth. A gentleman, my fair lady, whose presence in this house does incriminate the inmates with his evil designs, and poison your mind against me."

"Indeed, indeed, Sir Mark, I do assure you that Hubert Annersley does not stand in your way," pleaded Grace, vainly endeavouring to calm the storm that she had so unexpectedly raised.

"Then if it be not Hubert Annersley, who else is it I pray?" he exclaimed haughtily.

Grace could not answer him, she knew not what to say, her lips moved, but no words came, and Sir Mark in his jealous rage drew his own conclusions as he laid his hand upon her trembling arm and peered into her face.

"You have been told you have a rival, and it was he who told you," he hissed.

He waited for a reply, but none came. The excitement of the interview was beginning to tell upon the girl's weakened frame.

"He told you so," he repeated angrily.

She heard his accusation. Again her lips moved, but no words came; her brain was reeling; she would have fallen to the ground had she not caught hold of the oaken sideboard for support. Oh! for the return of strength for one minute that she might explain.

Sir Mark had taken up his hat and cane, and was about to quit the room when he paused a moment as if waiting for an explanation; but it never came.

"The traitorous scoundrel shall answer for his treachery," were his parting words, uttered in so significant a tone that the hearer guessed their meaning only too well. For a few minutes she stood still, vainly trying to collect her thoughts. Then she heard the hall door close, and looking through the window saw her angry lover striding along the avenue. She staggered towards the door, and made her way to her own room as best she could. It all

seemed to her scattered recollection like a horrible dream.

Squire Hewlyn returned from Bridgewater that day a little earlier than usual, so that he might be present at the conclusion of the haymaking. Just as he reached the top of the grand staircase he met Grace who fain would have passed her father unnoticed had he not seen that something was amiss. As he drew his daughter towards him, he said fondly:

"What is the matter, my child? what ails thee?"

"Father," was all she could say as she burst into tears and buried her head on his shoulder.

"What is it, my pet?" he repeated anxiously.

"Father, you will never forgive me," came the answer broken by sobs. "I am so unhappy."

"Why, my lass, I expected to make you cheerful with the news I have. I saw Hubert in Bridgewater to-day, and to-morrow he will be here. He would have come to-night but that his horse has failed him, and he would not leave the faithful creature behind."

The clouds had rolled away as if by magic; sunshine once more came into Grace's face.

"Here? father, here?" she exclaimed in excitement, looking up to him incredulously.

"Yes, child, here to-morrow," proceeded the old man, patting the girl's head fondly. "Does that surprise thee, dearest?"

"Oh, father," she cried, throwing her arms around the Squire's neck, "you have made me so very happy," and she kissed him again with such fervour that he looked in astonishment after her blithesome figure as she passed into her room.

Mistress Hewlyn was shortly afterwards closeted in earnest consultation with her spouse. She related

how Sir Mark had called and asked to see Grace. His object in calling was apparent, she urged with feminine instinct. She could not understand her daughter's strange behaviour. That she had refused Sir Mark she quite believed, and what her husband told her left no doubt in her mind that such was the case. Yet she felt at a loss to understand why Grace had thought fit to decline so advantageous an offer.

"Do you think, husband," she queried, "that our daughter has really refused him? You ought to know whether it is a refusal or not," she added significantly.

"Well, judging from the angry look Sir Mark bestowed on me as I passed him at the gate, I should say it was, my dear," replied the Squire. "But——" and the old man paused to think.

"But what?" queried his wife, placing much hope on the saving word.

"When I was refused," continued her husband, "I went away humbled; I had no such look of anger on my face; there was no fierceness about me, my dear. That's what puzzles; that's what puzzles me."

CHAPTER FIFTEENTH

THE DUEL

IN the large upper room of the "Lamb" Inn, reserved for any distinguished guests who happened to patronise that comfortable hostelry, Hubert Annersley sat, or rather lounged, upon one of the massive oaken settles that stood in front of the now empty fireplace.

Annersley, who evidently appeared somewhat depressed by the warmth of the afternoon and the dulness of his surroundings (a not uncommon feeling with strangers in a quiet country town like Bridgewater), was resting, for want of something better to do. He had managed to while an hour by gazing from the window, but so very few of the inhabitants appeared to be stirring in the streets that he found but little to interest him there, and so, stretched at full length upon the settle, he had prepared himself for a quiet siesta when he was aroused by a knock at the door.

"Come in," muttered Hubert in a sleepy and not too amiable tone, as the rotund figure of the worthy host appeared in the doorway. There he stood rubbing his hands in his old characteristic fashion, intimating he had come for the purpose of inquiring if his guest was in need of any refreshment; though, in reality, he merely wanted to satisfy his insatiable curiosity as to the object of Annersley's late visit

to the capital, and to find out, if possible, the cause of his unexpected return; for only yesterday he had overheard the Squire, quite accidentally of course, telling a friend that his godson's departure had been as much a surprise to him as his sudden arrival. This little bit of information was quite enough to keep our worthy friend John on the tip-toe of expectation.

It so happened that Annersley, on account of his dulness, was ready to hail the advent of John, or any other human being, with a certain amount of satisfaction, and he anticipated that with the talkative Coombs he would have no difficulty in disposing of an hour or more of the time which hung so heavily on his hands. Consequently, in answer to the host's inquiry, he bade him bring a bottle of wine and a couple of drinking cups, a request, needless to say, fulfilled with more alacrity than usual. It need not be supposed for one moment that the additional cup had anything at all to do with the swiftness with which the order was executed, for such an assumption might be doing an injustice to the "Lamb's" worthy host.

As soon as Annersley had filled both the cups, he motioned Coombs to be seated, and at the same time remarked: "Not been very busy to-day, John, eh?"

"No, sir; volk's spent all their money at the Maying, and we shan't be busy again avore two weeks and more be past, and haymaking be over. I suppose you vind it a bit quiet like, here, after Lunnon? A gay place that be, zir, a very gay place," added John, determined to come to the point at once, if possible. But unfortunately Annersley was in the mood to be talked to rather than talk himself, and consequently he only answered with an undisguised yawn: "Very.

what with the plague, and the fire, and now the small-pox it is pretty lively, by my troth."

"Ah! that was a dreadful business to be zure, zir. If only I had been in Lunnon, there might have been a sight of burning saved, I'll wager. Did you ever hear tell, zir," continued Coombs as he took a long draught of wine, "how I did help to zave Varmer Muggridge's varm vrom being burned to the ground? eh? and would er zaved his darter, too, if zo be that that imperent young jackanapes, Abram Tamsin, as art to er 'nowd better, just run up the ladder avore me an' pulled the girl out, but I were there ready, zir, I were there ready, you may be zure. Where lies the danger, there be John Coombs," he concluded, tapping his breast and tossing off the remainder of his wine.

"I feel sure of that, my friend," replied Annersley, smiling inwardly; "but as to London, there is mighty little trace of the plague left, and the fire has not proved the disaster that folks foretold."

"I doan't suppose as small-pox be got zo far as Greenwich? you've been there of course, zir?" insinuated Coombs.

"Yes," was the other's curt reply.

"A very gay place, Greenwich, a very gay place," hazarded John, in the hope of drawing Annersley out.

"Yes; but I presume that you know it well," was Hubert's rejoinder. Some sweet memory seemed to recall itself to the host, and his rubicund countenance beamed all over as he answered:

"Why, bless me, yes, zir, to be zure I do. I can well call to mind the last time I was there. Why, one of those scoundrelly press-gangs got hold of me, and bless my zoul and body didn't they make use o' awful language when I took my coat off and showed them I was a zoldier. I thanked my stars my good lady had

vainted avore they commenced their cussin'; them sailors can just swear," and he lifted his hands in pious horror at the mere recollection.

"Why, I should never have thought that Mistress Coombs was given to fainting," said Annersley somewhat sarcastically.

"Well, zir," replied Coombs, bending forward towards his guest and answering almost in a whisper, "there weren't no Mistress Coombs then."

Annersley smiled at the confidential manner in which this communication was made, and John, never loath to allow any opportunity of alluding to his military career to pass, continued: "I fancy I can zee the scoundrels now, as they slunk off directly I showed 'em what my calling was. I should have as soon thought of trouncing the lot of them, then, as I should of emptying this cup," he concluded with a dignified air, as he drank off at a gulp the wine Annersley had just poured out.

"I can well believe it, John," returned Annersley, "but how was it all the scoundrels got away without feeling the weight of your fist?"

"Ah, well," answered Coombs, slightly confused by the question. Then pulling himself together he continued with much dignity: "they knew well enough, zir, as a zoldier like me would die avore he would leave a woman in distress."

"Oh! I see. Quite right, John," ejaculated Annersley, now hardly able to restrain himself from laughing outright.

"Did you go to Greenwich?" inquired the host, making another attempt to draw his visitor out.

"No, John; I had but scant time for pleasure-seeking."

"Well, well!" continued Coombs in surprise, "I

hope your business was to your liking. Here's to whatever it was," and another draught of the ruby wine found its way down our friend's throat.

"I spent most of my time in the Fleet Street taverns, and in May Fair, listening to the latest news," answered Annersley carelessly.

"A gay place, May Fair," insinuated John again; "and if I might make so bold, what was the news, zir?"

"It mostly related to the Scottish Rebellion. There was a report just before I left that Argyle had been captured; but methinks the report had no truth in it, for I do verily believe that the noble Earl will prove a match not only for the King, but his parliament also."

"Bless me, zir, but you don't say so," exclaimed the other with wide-open eyes of astonishment; "how I should like to carry arms for His Majesty against them Scotch rebels; they be always a-plotting and a-disturbing the peace. You may not know, zir, I vought in Cromwell's army. I well remember the glorious vights we had, although they were against His Majesty King Charles, a circumstance I much regret. I am now none too old to use a sword, but if zo be you will excuse me vor the sayin', there was few could use a sword as I could in those days, though maybe Squire has told you that. Why, I remember, one day——"

"Yes, yes, my good fellow," interrupted Hubert, his thoughts wandering to another subject, "although you did such good service for Cromwell, methinks you have little sympathy with my lord of Argyle."

"Well, you zee, zir," answered Coombs in a confidential tone, "between you and me, zir, I have done so much vighting in my time that I be glad to zettle

down comfortable like. Then there bain't much money to be made zoldiering, not that I did not have the chance to do zo, bless me, no zir; vor on more 'an one occasion, eh—I mit zay on a score without telling a lie—I could have been rewarded right handsomely vor my services; but, zir," continued John, trying to look heroic, "I only did my duty, and a zoldier be no true zoldier at all if he wants to be rewarded for that. Why, I well remember, I was on outpost duty one night, zome mile or zo vrom the camp, when I did zee a goodly body of horsemen coming in my direction; they had come zo sudden on me that I had little time to think. Did I run away as many would have done? no, zir; not John Coombs. I just fell flat on my vace, and watched where the devils were a-going to. It zo happened as they turned off in another direction vrom the camp, zo I did not report the circumstance; but it was a touch and go, zir, a touch and go, I can tell you. Another time, too, I remember——"

"But your views, friend John, on the Earl's rebellion," suggested the listener impatiently, growing wearied of the host's deeds of heroism.

"Well, zir, zince you ask me, I do hear as the Scotch be mortal strict in their religious observances, and they du zay, too, as they hold tight to their purse-strings, much as Cromwell did: it was a bit irksome-like, being vond of seeing life myself, a very little life, zir," added Coombs, as he observed a smile cross the other's face. "Very different I vound it when I was in Lunnon, when the people was waiting to zee whether our zoldiers would declare vor King or Parliament. It was just when His late Majesty was restored, zir. Bless my stars! how the wine did vlow!" continued John, smacking his lips; "and the women"—— here he lowered his voice and looked cautiously

round at the closed door, "why, zir, the women volk could not do enough vor us; zo, zays I to myself, 'John, you ought to be a King's man;' and a King's man I have been ever since; and do you know, zir, that the rest of the zoldiers vollowed me. Here's His Majesty's good health, and God bless him," ended the valiant ex-soldier, again draining his cup.

"You are no Puritan I can see, my friend," returned Annersley, as he slapped John on the back with such vigour that that worthy was seized with a paroxysm of coughing.

"Are you going over to the Manor this evening, zir?" inquired Coombs, as soon as he had recovered from the fit of coughing. "Your horse looks vit and vresh after its rest. It be a mortal long ride vrom Lunnon, and it must needs be a vine animal that would take you the journey with zo little zigns of distress."

"Indeed he is," replied Hubert warmly; "the good beast would drop before he would give in. I could tell he had well-nigh had enough; and that is why I rested him here to-day rather than knock him up by proceeding the last few miles of my journey."

"Ah! here's another visitor for you," continued Hubert, who had risen and was gazing out of the window; "and, if I mistake not, it is none other than that valiant knight, Sir Mark Noble."

The host arose somewhat reluctantly from his seat, and with a "by your leave, zir," hastened as quickly as circumstances would permit to receive the new arrival.

The sound of voices from below was followed by the reappearance of Coombs, who stood in the doorway and announced that Sir Mark Noble wished an interview with Captain Annersley. Before Hubert

could answer, his visitor pushed his way into the room, and with a wave of the hand indicated that the inn-keeper's presence was not required. Annersley was about to step forward to greet his rival, but the look on the latter's face caused him to hesitate.

Directly John Coombs had retired from the room, Sir Mark flung his hat upon the table that acted as a barrier between the two, and his manner plainly showed that he was labouring under great excitement.

"I thought I should find you here," he said, his face darkening with passion; "you never find the vulture far from his feed," he concluded, with a sarcastic curl of the lip.

"Methinks you must have made a clever guess, my friend, for where I should be located to-day was unknown this morning even to myself," replied the other calmly, mystified at the intruder's manner, and failing to grasp the tenor of his remark.

"I said, 'where the prey is, there also is the vulture,'" retorted Sir Mark fiercely, nettled at Hubert's calm demeanour.

"Your manner lacks dignity, Sir Mark, and your simile is not complimentary. Be kind enough to explain the cause of this intrusion," exclaimed Annersley with warmth, seeing that a studied insult was intended.

"Your innocence, sir, ill becomes a truckster," sneered Sir Mark. "It suffices, perhaps, to deceive a woman, for you know full well how to sow your venomous seed, and then to betake yourself off in order to give time for your poison to work; but you have no woman to deal with now; you have to answer to me. I am here to demand what business it be of yours to inform Mistress Grace of my doings; what concerns are these of yours, I pray?" saying which

the angry speaker removed his gauntlets and cast them on the table beside his hat, in a manner that indicated he would brook no evasion of his question.

"If you say that I mentioned either yourself or any of your doings to Mistress Grace Hewlyn, you lie," retorted Annersley angrily.

"The girl herself has so informed me," interrupted Sir Mark hotly, "and thou art the liar."

There was a sound of steel being withdrawn from steel as both drew their rapiers at the same instant. Sir Mark turned and shot the bolt on the inside of the door with an ominous clang, whilst Annersley dragged the table to the upper end of the room.

With a look of determination and hate the two men stood facing one another—a look that showed both were fully conscious of the issue to be fought out, and that death must come to one or the other. They were equally matched in height, strength, and apparently in skill.

The look of hatred faded from their faces, and gave way to one of pallid eagerness as their swords crossed. Then ensued a struggle not to be realised by any man unless he has faced death. Their eyes became fixed; each movement of the one was answered by a negative movement of the other; each strove for the mastery as cut after cut was warded off, and every thrust was skilfully parried. Great beads of perspiration gathered on the combatants' pallid cheeks, until at length, as if by mutual consent, they retreated a pace, and stood a short while, each waiting for the other to recommence the attack. With chests heaving and a murderous smile playing round their twitching lips, they once again advanced to the centre of the apartment. In the twinkling of an eye the swords crossed. Sir Mark made a savage lunge, and it

almost looked for a moment as if he had wounded his adversary; but Annersley, with marvellous agility, reached back in the nick of time, and avoided what would otherwise have been a dangerous if not a fatal wound.

Then Annersley sprang forward again. Both were now losing patience, and the clang of steel rang on as the thrusts and parries became fast and furious.

So engrossed were the combatants in endeavouring to inflict mortal injuries upon one another, that they failed to hear the galloping of a horse along the almost silent street. The noise, however, was so great that it brought the townsfolk to their doors to gape in wonder after the flying rider.

When at length the horseman stopped at the door of the "Lamb," the animal was dead beat, and with dilated nostrils, foaming mouth, and panting sides, he stood waiting for his master to dismount; but the man appeared no less fatigued than his good steed, and tarried awhile ere he leapt to the ground.

John Coombs ran hurriedly to the door at a pace that sadly upset his equilibrium, and quickly a crowd, that increased every moment, gathered to stare open-mouthed at so novel a sight.

"Friends," cried the man who had caused all this excitement, "the great Duke of Monmouth has landed at Lyme Regis, and is marching with a large army through Devon. He will shortly be here, and knows you will give him a right royal welcome. He comes to champion your rights. Three cheers for the Protestant Duke!" he concluded, waving his hat in the air. The crowd, hardly grasping the meaning of his words, and completely taken by surprise, did as he bade them, and gave three ringing cheers. The mysterious rider then inquired the whereabouts of

Captain Annersley; and John Coombs, burning to hear something further of the matter, hurriedly led the messenger upstairs to where the two men were fighting for dear life, deaf to all outside influences.

As many of the gaping crowd as could squeeze up the narrow staircase followed, and the excitement became intense when it was found that the door was bolted from the inside.

"Zir, zir!" shouted Coombs at the top of his voice as he thumped at the door with both fists, "you be wanted."

But still the door remained closed. He endeavoured to listen, but the clamour behind prevented him hearing a sound. Again he thumped, once, twice, thrice, with all his might, until at length the bolt was drawn back suddenly, and through the open door Annersley was seen, sword in hand, whilst Sir Mark stood with a hang-dog expression gazing at his weapon which was lying some yards from him on the ground.

John Coombs quickly took in the situation, and thanked his stars that murder had been prevented in his house. He then broke out with:

"The Duke, zir, the great Duke has landed at Lyme, and has raised a great army to champion our rights; zo zays this gentleman here."

Hubert advanced with a quick and eager step towards the Duke's messenger, and almost snatched the paper held out to him, from his hands. A glance was sufficient.

"It is true," he shouted, "the people have joined him in thousands, he has met with no opposition, and will be here ere many days have passed. Quick, my good friend John, open your best cask, and we will drink to the Duke's cause."

The news spread rapidly, and the noise in the

street indicated that the townsfolk were gathering. Everybody seemed to be talking at once, the astounding news was eagerly discussed, then dissected, then added to, and then dissected again. Everybody remembered how the handsome Duke had ridden through the West amidst the acclamations of the populace, and how the country magnates had flung open their houses, and how their cellars had been free to all.

"Yes," said one, "what a winning smile he had."

"The favourite of his father the King," said another.

"They du think much of him in the great city," said another.

"Du they?" inquired a fourth, with a look of astonished half-conviction.

"Yes," answered the man who had volunteered the information, and was only too anxious to let the assembled crowd know that he had been to London. "When I was there I saw a procession, stretching for miles, carrying torches and dragging flaming tar-barrels, and there was the Duke on horseback, a-bowing and smiling to everybody, and the bells of the churches were all a-ringing as if they were trying to shake the towers down;" but his hearers had heard more than enough, and were all agog as to what was going to happen next, as they stood gazing up at the windows of the "Lamb." Presently a lattice was opened, and Annersley appeared bareheaded.

"Men of Somerset," he began, raising his voice so that all could hear him, "you all know his Grace, the Duke of Monmouth."

"We du, we du," was the answering shout of the crowd.

"You know how your late King loved him, and died with his name on his lips."

"Ay, zir, that we du," was the unanimous reply.

"And that for vile purposes of their own the Duke's enemies say that he is not the King's rightful son, and furthermore, that he plotted against His Majesty," continued Annersley excitedly. "You have seen him: you can judge of him yourselves. Now he has come among you again to maintain your faith, to maintain your institutions, to give you freedom, by force of arms if necessary. Will you join hands with your brothers in Devon and help him?"

"We will," went up in a mighty roar.

"Then drink with me," shouted Annersley, turning to those within the room, and holding a cup aloft. "Success to the arms of the Duke of Monmouth!"

"God bless the Protestant Duke!" came from a hundred throats at once, and the cry was taken up in the streets by a thousand more. Annersley glanced at Sir Mark with a look of triumph; but his late opponent only scowled.

"You had better take this," resumed Annersley, handing his rival the sword he picked up from the floor; "there is no knowing but that you may have need of it. But you are not drinking, man. Come, drink to the 'Cause.'"

Sir Mark looked round upon the excited faces watching him, and deemed it prudent to comply with Annersley's request. Raising a cup to his lips he muttered sulkily: "The Cause," and then pushing through the crowd made his way downstairs, and the best speed he could home.

For hours afterwards the people lingered in the streets, or split up in little groups discussing the news that had given rise to this stir. "When would the Duke arrive?" "Would there be any fighting?" "Would the Parliament demand that King James should give up his claim to the throne?" "Would

the King, taking warning by the fate of his father, give up the crown?" All these questions and many more were bandied about from one mouth to another.

"Where is Host Coombs?" inquired Annersley of Mistress Coombs, who was busy doing a roaring trade with those who preferred discussing the situation in the cosy tap-room of the inn to standing about in the street.

Mistress Coombs for answer pointed to her private room.

"But I'm aveared 'ee 'ont vind un much use to 'ee," she remarked as Annersley was about to enter. There sure enough was that gallant. The excitement of the afternoon had evidently been too much for him. He did not appear to recognise his visitor, and had evidently totally forgotten that but a short time previously he had declared himself a King's man, for as Hubert advanced into the room he looked up, and raising a drinking-cup aloft, muttered several times incoherently: "The Cause."

CHAPTER SIXTEENTH

BEACON FIRES

IT would be difficult to describe Sir Mark's frame of mind as he rode home after his encounter with Annersley at the "Lamb." He felt that he had been worsted and humiliated. His blood boiled when he thought of the degradation he had undergone at the hands of the man whom he had gone out to kill. He ground his teeth with impotent rage, and struck his spurs savagely into the sides of the animal he was riding, as he recalled the incidents of the afternoon. It was a stroke of luck for him, the timely arrival of Monmouth's messenger. Had he been but a few minutes later, he might not now have been making his way homeward. Why had fate been against him? Why had he not killed this man, this emissary of the rebel Duke, for such he now knew Annersley to be? Had he slain him, he felt he need have had no fear of the King's proclamation in the Gazette against duelling, for he would have gained his own ends, and served his King and country at the same time, and would, no doubt, have been rewarded at the hands of His Majesty for his services. Then, too, what a blow it would have been to the "Cause!" Bah! the "Cause!" To think that this man had compelled him to drink to it before that howling mob of half-drunken louts. "But the time will come," he muttered to himself; "he

shall receive no mercy at my hands; he shall drink to the King ere his worthless carcase is consigned to the crows." Those country clowns, too, who had so glibly shouted the Duke's name, and drunk to the impostor's cause at Annersley's expense, should cry aloud for mercy, if he, Sir Mark Noble, had anything to do with the matter. What were the Hewlyns doing to help the Duke's plans? he wondered: finding money, no doubt. He would wait and watch further developments; but let them look to themselves, for he would make it go ill with them when the rebels were defeated, as he was confident they would be. Grace would find herself mistaken; it would be capitulation, and he would dictate the terms.

These were Sir Mark's thoughts as he rode homewards, and he solaced his wounded feelings in no small degree as he worked out in his imagination the revenge he would wreak upon those who had thwarted him, and stood in the way of his attaining his ends. As he neared Ashton Mill he again set his spurs to his horse, and passed at such a headlong pace that Mistress Swaine ran to the door to see who the reckless rider might be. She was only just able to recognise Sir Mark by his back, as he was disappearing from view. "'E be in a mortal hurry," the good dame muttered to herself, as she returned to her work.

The rider had just reached the spot where the road branched off in two directions, one leading to the Manor, and the other to the Hall, when he came in view of a figure with which he felt sure he was familiar, walking hurriedly along in front of him. Sir Mark was correct in his surmise, for the figure turned out to be none other than that of Kate Fletcher. She was quick to recognise the horseman as he drew up, and with difficulty brought his steed to a standstill by her side.

"Ah! Kate, my lass, is that you? What brings you this way?" he asked quite pleasantly.

"I have just been to the Mill to give aunt a message from Mistress Grace," she answered. "I am so glad to see you, sir. Do you come from Bridgewater?" continued the girl, a look of joy lighting up her face, and then she shyly drooped her eyelids, as she gently stroked the beautiful animal Sir Mark was riding.

Her question unintentionally rekindled memories it would have been better to have let rest, for her companion replied sharply, as the colour mounted to his face.

"Yes, girl, from the rebel house, where thy mother was busy with the thirsty crowd that that traitor Annersley seems to have conjured up from the very stones of the street. A truly noble lot, by gad!" he added with a sneer, and then continued fiercely: "but let them drink; let them plot; for as surely as yon setting sun shall rise again to-morrow, they'll shout for mercy and not for liquor—mark my words," he concluded through his clenched teeth.

"O Mark dear!" exclaimed the girl, frightened at the vehemence of his tone, "what do you mean?"

"Mean, child," he answered harshly, "that the bastard Duke of Monmouth has taken up arms against my lord the King, and will shortly be here, 'tis said, with an army, and that your mistress's lover is implicated in the rising, curse him!"

"O Mark," answered Kate soothingly, not grasping the meaning of his words, but only thinking of his anger, "I am so glad, I am so glad to see you. I was afeared we were never going to meet again."

"And we must not; at any rate, not here," he added quickly, correcting himself as he observed the girl's startled expression.

"What do you mean, Mark dear?" Kate asked,

raising her hand, and placing it softly on his, as she lifted her lustrous eyes with a look of mute appeal.

"Oh, nothing, child," he answered impatiently, "except that you must not remain here: you have done me great harm already."

"Harm, Mark! me done you harm?" she asked with an expression of wonder and incredulity.

"Yes, girl; people are beginning to talk, and it will do neither me nor you any good," he replied.

"I care not for that," she answered fondly, "so long as I know that I shall be thy wife. But what harm have I done thee, Mark, dear?" she again anxiously inquired of her lover.

"This is a small place, Kate, and folks will talk of the difference in our stations; you must go away from here to a place where you are unknown," he answered, as he bent down and made pretence to tighten a strap, so that the girl should not observe the colour that mounted to his face, as he made this cruel suggestion.

"But, Mark, dearest, you told me that did not matter. Oh! where—where can I go? I will go anywhere with you," she pleaded, still labouring under the glamour of his presence.

"Do you really think I can marry you, Kate?" he asked in desperation, as he bent towards the small figure at his side.

She raised her face to his with an appealing look. Do you mean this? was plainly writ in those tear-laden, beseeching eyes. Slowly it dawned upon the poor girl that the castle she had built for herself was but of sand, which one cruel wave had washed away. Nothing remained to her save a barren waste, where her pleasant dwelling had so lately stood, and she was left homeless, friendless, and without hope. A

convulsive sob shook her whole frame, and with a heartrending groan, she covered her face with her hands to hide her agony of mind. Even the selfish cause of all this misery could not help looking down on his handiwork with pity.

"Come, come, child," he said, endeavouring to comfort her. "I will take you away—you shall go with me to London—you shall be my wife."

"Wilt thou swear that?"

"If you will go, and tell no one, I will arrange all for you."

"And wilt thou give me a love-token, Mark" she pleaded.

"What a strange request, child! What can I give you?" he answered smilingly, wishing to soothe her feelings. Then placing his hand inside his vest, he drew out a small bronze cross, which was suspended round his neck. Quickly breaking the ribbon that held it, he pressed the amulet into her hand, saying: "Don't show it or lose it, for it belonged to my father."

The girl pressed the token to her lips: there was little fear of Kate Fletcher parting with her lover's gift whilst life remained in her body.

"Come now, we must not tarry here longer," said Sir Mark, turning round in his saddle to make sure nobody had been a witness of the meeting. "As soon as the rebels have been dealt with," he continued, "I will see thee as to my promise; until then, farewell," and he bent down for the girl to kiss him.

"Will that be long, Mark? and what will they do with the rebels?" she said inquiringly, as her lover was gathering up the reins to depart.

"Kill them, child, kill them," he hissed as he started off. Then, with a harsh laugh, which rang in the girl's ears long afterwards, he turned and

pointed with his whip to the sign-post planted where the cross-roads met, and shouted once again: "Kill them, girl. Yon post will be no pleasant sight to pass ere many weeks are gone."

Kate watched the rider until he was out of sight, and then hurried towards the Manor. Suddenly she stopped. She remembered Jack's conversation with her as they returned from the Maying. A soldier, he said he was going to be with Captain Annersley. Captain Annersley was a rebel—Sir Mark had told her so; then Jack was a rebel—they would both be killed! She almost screamed aloud as she thought of it. If Mistress Grace only knew! "What have I done? what have I done?" she moaned as she realised to the full the consequences that might ensue. And Jack was going to be a soldier—"for my sake, for my sake," she kept repeating to herself.

How she reached the Manor she never quite knew, but it was growing late, and her mistress, who was waiting for her, quickly noticed her agitated condition.

"What is it, Kate? what has happened?" Grace asked anxiously, as she looked upon the pale and frightened face.

"Nothing, mistress Grace, nothing; I only feel faint like." Still she put up her hands to her throat, and would have fallen to the ground had not gentle arms caught her as she sank into a deep swoon.

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"What is that light, Simon?" asked Sir Mark of the old servant as he was removing the remains of his master's evening meal. Sir Mark had risen from the table, and stood gazing out of the window into the night. His attention had been attracted by a small speck of light that every moment seemed to increase in size. "There is no house in that direction," he added

"No, zir," answered the old man, as he shaded his eyes with his hand and peered into the darkness in the direction his master indicated. "That be Dunkerry way, but I zee no light, zir: my zight be mortal dim, mortal dim," repeated the old servant in a sad tone.

"There, man, there," said Sir Mark, pointing excitedly in the same direction; "why, I can see the flames distinctly."

"I zee a light at Bagborough, zir; that be nearer," said Simon.

"Bagborough!" echoed his master, as he followed the direction of the trembling finger of the white-haired man at his side. "Yes, yes, I can see it; why, it is a similar fire." An oath escaped his lips as he noticed a third tongue of flame shoot up from a yet nearer hill. The burning mass seemed so close that he could almost hear the crackle of the heather faggots, and he could distinctly see myriads of sparks shoot upwards as the fire fell in, and was replenished by unseen hands.

"Simon," exclaimed Sir Mark, seizing his servant by the arm, "these are beacon fires. Who has done this?" and he tightened his grip, as if the old man had something to do with the lighting and could give information on the subject. But Simon only shook his hoary head as he answered in a quavering voice:

"This be quick work, maister, quick work; there will be more trouble with them rebels 'an most on us think vor, zir, or I be much mistook."

"We shall see, Simon! we shall see!" muttered Sir Mark as he angrily left the apartment, seized his hat, and walked out into the darkness. Revenge was nearer than he had anticipated; but it could not be too near to please the master of Stow Hall.

CHAPTER SEVENTEENTH — *GRACE HEARS NEWS OF ANNERSLEY*

"HE will be here to-morrow," was the joyous thought that was uppermost in Grace Hewlyn's mind as she sank to rest on the night her father had brought the news of Hubert Annersley's unexpected return from London. "He will be here to-day," was her first thought at waking next morning. "I wonder if he will notice that I have been ill," she asked Kate Fletcher, as her morning toilet was being completed.

"Why, to be sure, no, Mistress Grace," was the ready reply. "I have not seen you looking so bright and happy since——"

"Since when?" quickly interposed her mistress.

"Since he was here last," answered Kate.

Now Grace, woman-like, had assured herself previously as to what her maid's answer would be, but she had put the question perhaps for the sake of saying something, or perhaps because she possessed many of the characteristics of Eve—characteristics that will lead a woman to ask if her hat or bonnet is accurately poised, or if her veil is straight, when only one moment previously she has passed a glass and satisfied herself that she is "fixed up," as an American would say, to her own satisfaction. Indeed, one would imagine that women might make an excellent jury, so anxious are they to obtain corroborative evidence.

The morning, the afternoon, and the evening

passed, but still Hubert did not arrive at the Manor. Grace had to console herself with the thought: "He will come to-morrow!" but to-morrow never comes, they say, and neither did Hubert Annersley come to the Manor. Poor Grace's happiness was short-lived indeed. "Why did he say he would come?" she asked herself, and her mind wandered back to the night they parted. "He said he would never forget me;" but even this thought afforded her but poor consolation.

She remembered Sir Mark's deception, and the colour faded from her cheek. But she could not quite bring herself to place Annersley in the same category as the man whose offer of marriage she had refused. Still, something seemed to whisper to her: "He deceived you; why should not your other lover?" There are times when trifles will cause our minds to become warped, and render it impossible for us to see things in other than one light, and that light possibly the blackest. Thus it was with Grace Hewlyn. One adverse thought once set rolling, caused an avalanche of doubt to sweep over her mind, leaving a feeling of the deepest despair in its wake.

Squire Hewlyn had himself brought the news of Monmouth's landing to his daughter, and by that time it was known in every house in the country, however remote or secluded it might be. Grace herself had witnessed the blazing beacon fires on the hills, each a silent warning that some untoward event had happened. Still she could not account for Hubert's non-arrival, and it was with many doubts and fears that she awaited her father's return from Bridgewater, whither he had gone a few days afterwards to learn the cause of his godson's delay, and also to appease his daughter's mind.

At length Grace, with beating heart, heard the sound of hoofs in the courtyard. She listened eagerly, and endeavoured to distinguish whether one or more horses had entered. Then she hastened down to the entrance hall, and her heart sank within her as she saw her father standing at the foot of the staircase, alone.

"Where is he, father dear?" she asked in a voice that plainly showed she feared what his answer might be. But the old man, who knew not how his daughter hungered for his reply, was in no mood to forego the embrace he was always accustomed to receive on his return from a journey. It was therefore a few seconds, that seemed minutes to Grace, before her father answered her question.

"Oh, he's all right, my dear," said the Squire as soon as he had released the girl from his embrace. "I hear that the Duke will probably be at Taunton in a day or two."

"Yes, yes, father dear," said Grace impatiently; "I pray you tell me of Hubert—where is he?"

"Oh, Hubert, my child, is well enough, so at least says Mistress Coombs, and further, that he did go to join the Duke immediately the news came of his landing in England."

"Gone!" was the only word Grace could utter, and although her father did his best to amuse her with tales of what he had seen and done and heard during his absence, naught seemed to interest her. She was as one stunned, with one thought in her mind: Hubert was gone!

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"O Mistress Grace," said Kate Fletcher, a few days subsequently, as she almost ran into her mistress's room, "Jack is at the Mill; you should see him

mistress. He has great boots on—jack-boots he calls them—and a coat with red and yellow facings, and such a smart hat with a plume of oak leaves in it, and he carries a sword, too; you must see him, mistress, before he goes back to Taunton," exclaimed Kate excitedly, and quite out of breath.

"Did he say he saw any of our friends at Taunton?" asked Grace eagerly.

"I think he said he had seen Captain Annersley."

"Seen—seen Captain Annersley," repeated Grace; "are you sure he said that, Kate?"

"Oh, yes; I am sure he said that," replied the girl.

"When does your cousin return to Taunton?" was Grace's next query.

"To-night, he said, mistress."

Grace thought a moment, and then said:

"Get me my hood and cloak, child: I have a mind to see how Jack looks before he leaves to-day."

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"Why, bless me, if it bean't Mistress Grace comin' doun t' road; she be comin' t' see 'ee, Jack, I'll warrant," called Mistress Swaine to her son as she stood in the doorway; "'ee'll turn all the lasses' heads avore many days, I du reckon."

Jack, who was sitting in the kitchen, did not receive this piece of information as he should have done, for he shuffled uneasily in his seat, and finally made a furtive attempt to escape from the room by a back entrance; but his design in that quarter was frustrated by his mother, who, guessing what he was about to do, in a loud voice politely, but firmly, bade him not to make a vool of himself.

Mistress Swaine herself, far from wishing to avoid the newcomer, simply beamed with delight, and welcomed Grace with her very best courtsey. The

old lady had become infected with the military spirit in the air, more especially since she had seen her son in his uniform, and she had every reason to be proud of him, for a finer soldier never handled sword or musket than our friend Jack Swaine. One, however, may get satiated even with a mother's admiration—at least so Jack felt after she had made him dress and undress at least a score of times. Truth to tell, he had never been more uncomfortable in his life, and longed, as far as the clothes were concerned, to be as every day in the past. After the first words of greeting were over, Mistress Swaine commenced to turn her son round and round like a teetotum for her visitor's inspection.

"Now, Jack, put on your hat," said his mother, addressing him as if he were a performing dog. Swaine complied somewhat sheepishly, and adjusted his headgear in a very awkward style.

"There," said the proud parent, "what do 'ee think o' that, Mistress Grace?"

"He makes a very fine soldier," answered Grace sincerely, "and if the Duke has many more like him, he need have little fear of the forces of the King."

"Jack say as Tarnt'n be vull a zoldiers, and they be havin' gran' doings; haven't they, Jack?" inquired his mother.

Jack nodded assent.

"An' 'e du zay that all the houses were decked up with flags, and covered with flowers, and that zome maidens all dressed in white gave the Duke a beautiful embroidered—what did 'ee call it, Jack?"

"Standard," answered her son.

"Also a Bible," continued the widow; "and then the great Duke made a speech, and said he would defend 'em and vight vor 'em, and then did the

zoldiers and the people cheer until they were hoarse, zo zays Jack, mistress. And what else was it 'ee zaid, Jack?"

But Mistress Swaine had exhausted all the news, for her son only answered: "Nothing, mother."

"Did you see my father, Jack—he has been over to Taunton to-day—or anybody else?" inquired Grace anxiously.

"I must have missed the Squire, Mistress Grace, but I did zee Captain Annersley," was Swaine's reply.

"What did he say, Jack? Did he ask about us at the Manor?" said Grace with averted head.

"Not as I know of," was Swaine's blunt reply.

Grace sat down at the table as if to rest, and covered her face with her hands, for her eyes filled with tears when she heard Swaine's answer. Mistress Swaine saw what had happened, and guessing the girl's secret exclaimed, nodding violently at her son:

"Did he not zay summat about Mistress Grace?"

"Oh, yes," said Swaine, "he did ask me to be zure and ask after her, and to vind out if she be better."

"Did he really say that?" said the girl eagerly. "Did he say anything else?"

Swaine was rather at a loss for an answer. From his mother's incessant nodding behind Grace's back, he knew be ought to say something. He was not, however, as we have seen, of an inventive turn of mind, more especially where conversation was concerned, and it was not until he had scratched his head and murmured: "Let me zee," half-a-dozen times that he said with an air of triumph: "Oh, yes, he did ask me if old Zoloman Tamzin, as wedded Widow Hemby's darter, were blessed with children."

So pleased was Jack with the success of his efforts, that he glanced across at his mother for a mark of

appreciation, but that good lady only frowned ominously as she exclaimed: "You be a born vool where women are concerned, Jack." Then looking at Grace, she saw the tears still trickling through her fingers, and thinking it best to leave the young mistress from the great house alone, she made a sign to her astonished son to leave the room, saying as he went: "'Ee go and look at the horses, Jack; 'ee'll want to zee 'em avore 'ee go back." Jack looked at Grace, and then at his hat as he stood in the doorway, hesitating as if he wished to say something. Then Grace was left alone with her sorrow,

. . . . . .

"Mistress Grace," said a voice a few minutes later at her very elbow, causing the girl to start and look up. She saw Swaine at her side.

"If you please, Mistress Grace," he continued, "the Captain is dreadfully busy; he says them young men du want a mighty deal o' training avore they'll make zoldiers, and he du take very little rest a-teaching them night an' day. Can I take him any message?"

"You are very thoughtful, Jack; indeed you are very kind; you can tell him that I am well. But Jack, promise me that you won't tell him what you have seen," she said entreatingly, "will you promise me, Jack, because if he knew I could never look him in the face again."

"Yes, Mistress Grace, I promise," answered Swaine, not quite understanding why she should make such a fuss about so small a matter. "Can't I give un any other message? can't I zay you love him, mistress?"

"Jack," said Grace severely as she rose from her seat, "if you tell him that, I will never speak to you or him again," a threat that puzzled Swaine more than ever; "but," added Grace, "you are strong, and

I know you will be a brave soldier. Will you help him if he is in danger, for my sake, Jack? Promise me you will—it will make me feel quite happy."

"That I will, mistress; I swear that," replied the honest fellow vehemently. Then his old halting, hesitating look came over his face again as he played with and twisted his hat round and round. "Will you, Mistress Grace," he said at length with downcast eyes, "zay a good word vor me to Kate?"

It was as well his eyes were cast down, for a look of unutterable sorrow came over Grace's face as she answered in a tone of sadness: "I will do my best for you, Jack," and she laid her hand gently on his arm. But Swaine noticed only the affirmative answer, and he knew that in Grace Hewlyn he had found a friend who would keep her promise, and his heart was glad that he had such a one to champion his cause.

CHAPTER EIGHTEENTH

VACILLATION

"EVERY great and commanding movement in the annals of the world is the triumph of enthusiasm," said a great American statesman. This may be so, but triumph does not necessarily follow in the wake of enthusiasm. There may be sincerity, frequently justice, probably truth ; but without the master hand, without a firm direction and an unswerving purpose, enthusiasm becomes so much wasted energy. Better far in such a case, and when the cause espoused means bloodshed, attempt to level the Alps with a spade, or to remove the Pyramids in a hod, than to open the flood-gates of war. War that makes the very demons of pestilence and famine hide their diminished heads as awe-struck, they view the greater destructive powers of their rightful ruler.

Enthusiasm for the great Duke had been gradually rising, and the excitement in the West of England was intense. Mistress Swaine, as the spokeswoman of her son, had but inadequately portrayed to Grace Hewlyn the welcome that Taunton town had extended to Monmouth. The windows and doors of every house were adorned with green boughs and sweet-smelling flowers. Hardly a soul could be seen in the streets without "the Duke's green," upon his person. Annersley was right: Monmouth had won the hearts of the people. Never was a man more beloved ;

their joy was a delirium, their enthusiasm infectious. None thought of the morrow, none prophesied evil.

It was with an imposing though dust-stained army that the Duke marched into Bridgewater from Taunton, acclaimed on all sides. As he neared the town, his progress was impeded by the press of the multitude. He was riding at the head of his men, followed by a life-guard of mounted troopers, much as he had ridden but a few years previously when accompanied by a civil force of sturdy, well-mounted yeoman followers. There he rode on his handsome charger, his commanding and well-proportioned figure clothed in the latest French style, his open braided coat disclosing a rich silk vest with heavy silver trimmings and a neckcloth of fine lace. He looked every inch a leader of men, and as for his bravery, was it not on all lips? had it not been proved? His finely-chiselled face, large and lustrous if sad eyes, and long, curling hair, completed the figure of a singularly handsome man. Although it might be said by some that his face bordered upon the effeminate and lacked decision, yet it was a face beloved of women, who, as a rule, are rather attracted by opposites. The calm, frank look inspired confidence in one and all. To that great press of humanity the Duke was a brave and handsome hero—the deliverer of his country. The windows of every house were thronged with spectators as Monmouth made his way to the High Cross, where Mayor Popham and the corporation of the ancient Borough waited to welcome him in the name of the country with much state and regal ceremony. His path was everywhere strewn with flowers. When he replied to the Mayor's greeting, perfect silence came over the vast concourse in the market-place. The words of thanks, uttered in his clear and ringing

voice, were heard by all, and as he finished the air was rent with applause and acclamations.

Event had succeeded event, and for the second time within the space of three weeks Monmouth again entered Bridgewater. With his second coming the ardour of the townspeople was unabated, for it was with every whit as much joy as upon the former occasion that they greeted King Monmouth and his army which now contained so many of their relatives and friends. Nevertheless, the intervening period had been to Monmouth and his officers a time of bitter disappointment, though his faithful followers, ever trustful and loyal to their leader, knew not the evil that the marching and counter-marching portended. They only knew that upon almost every occasion on which they had been allowed to meet the King's forces the best of the encounter had rested with themselves; for had they not in their long march to Bristol and Bath driven the enemy out of Keynsham, and at Philip's Norton made them flee, leaving behind many killed and wounded? "The Lord is with us," they told the crowd that followed them to the camping ground, "and will shortly deliver the enemy into our hands." But it was with a very heavy heart that Hubert Annersley listened to the welcoming cheers of the populace as he marched his men down by the river's bank to the Castle Fields, where the troops were to take up their quarters until further orders.

"Shall I go to the 'Lamb,' zir, and get 'ee a bed there, for, lest I be mighty quick, 'ee will have to sleep on the ground again to-night, zir, which 'ee have done too often lately? Thy back must long vor comfort," said Swaine, as he finished brushing the dust off his captain's clothes.

"A good idea, Jack, my lad; and Mistress Coombs will make us right welcome, I feel sure. Come, there is no time to lose."

Without delay the two set out with rapid strides through the lines of soldiers who were now gossiping with their friends or resting from the fatigues of their long march. They soon passed the Castle and the Cross and reached the hospitable door of the "Lamb."

"The Lord bless us," ejaculated Mistress Coombs as she saw the two tall figures walk up the flagged passage, "why, here be Jack and the Captain."

She had hardly time to make this remark before Annersley announced himself with a cheery greeting.

"Right glad I am to see 'ee, zir," she said sincerely, wiping away with her sleeve the tears that came to her eyes.

"And you, Jack, are 'ee well, and are all thy limbs sound? Thy mother is turrble anxious about 'ee."

"As sound as a bell," chimed Hubert, "and ready to use his hands on anything you can put before him, to prove by his actions that he is sound both in wind and limb. A cup of cider also for both of us will help our disgestion while you make the needful preparations. A bottle of your best red Flemish will be welcome a little later. Where is our host?"

Here sundry rappings, presumably on a table, and stamping of feet, interrupted the speaker.

"Oh, 'e be in the kitchen," replied Mistress Coombs; but the noise had already caused the two to move towards the room from whence it proceeded.

It was with difficulty that Hubert Annersley could look into the apartment, for around the door were grouped a knot of country yokels, whilst the kitchen itself was crowded with a similar agricultural element, save in the middle, where there was a wide and clear

space. Standing in the centre of this was John Coombs, the perspiration streaming down his ruddy face. One hand he held above his head, whilst the other grasped a sword. He was cutting and slashing apparently at an imaginary foe, an expert in these matters might perhaps say a little wildly. He accompanied each thrust by bringing his foot heavily to the ground, creating a sound that would have delighted the ears of a step-dancer. His unseen foe was to all appearances retreating, for our valiant friend continued to advance. It was only the spectators at the end of the room who actually gave way. Stay! Surely his enemy had fallen, mortally wounded; that last thrust could have signified nothing else but a *coup de grace.* John lowered his weapon, and looked round upon his open-mouthed and astonished audience in triumph. There was a moment of silence that gave the company time to recover themselves. Then they showed their sense of his prowess by several outbursts of spontaneous applause, sufficient to have encouraged the master to give another exhibition as an encore, but the crowd in the doorway parted, and two stalwart soldiers entered, a fitting climax, which prevented a repetition of the performance.

"A clever display of your skill, friend John, for which we thank you," said Annersley with a smile that he had great difficulty in controlling. He would have laughed outright, but for the fear of giving offence as he advanced to where his host stood, resting on his sword hilt in an attitude of self-conscious triumph which even Mars himself might have hesitated to assume. A cloud swept over the innkeeper's face at the entrance of the two other Richmonds, for he knew that his glory in the eyes of the assemblage would depart with their arrival. However, the suavity

of manner engendered in him by his calling soon returned, particularly as his vanity was tickled by so important a soldier as Captain Annersley addressing him so familiarly and cordially.

"Welcome, sir, to Bridgewater, and anything that the 'Lamb' can provide is at your service," he replied proudly.

"Thanks, thanks, John; thy good wife is now busy in procuring all that is necessary, and will more than suffice, I reckon, for our modest requirements," replied Annersley.

"Thou art free from cannon or musket shot, or sword thrust, I pray, zir, and you too, Jack?" Coombs asked as he eyed the two from head to foot.

"Yes, thank Heaven! John; not a scratch on either of us, although our men have had several encounters with the enemy. Warm work whilst it lasted, eh, Jack?" said Annersley, turning to Swaine.

"Yes, zir. How zo many o' us escaped at Philip's Norton when we'd run the gauntlet o' the Duke of Grafton's men, posted behind the hedges within a stone's throw of us, were a mercy, zir."

"Indeed it was, but our men soon drove them from their shelter. It was your first fight, Jack, and you acquitted yourself right nobly," Annersley said with an approving look at the tall soldier by his side.

"It's in the blood, zir, it's in the blood," exclaimed Coombs, in his enthusiasm forgetting that Jack was his relative only by courtesy. "We heard that *our* cannon made great slaughter with the King's men, too," he added, speaking with the authority of one who had been present. "It must needs be a brave man to stand against their thunder, and one is not safe against a cannon ball at a distance of full half-a-mile. I remember," but here host Coombs was

interrupted in the incident of his military career that he was about to relate by the appearance of his better half who announced to her guests that the table had been laid for them.

"John," she said authoritatively, "'ee remain here; there be quite enough for 'ee to do. They be hungry and don't want thy tattle."

But on this occasion John was not to be denied, for he placed his hand upon his nephew's arm, and was heard by all to say confidentially as he followed his guests into the private parlour:

"Jack, they tell as the town is to be fortified. If there is going to be a vight, mind I shall be with 'ee, I shall be with 'ee."

Now it would be wrong to question the good intentions of Master Coombs, but it sometimes happens that even a soldier's destiny is governed by influences he is powerless to control. He did not observe the expression that came over the face of Mistress Coombs as she heard his stage whisper. Perhaps, though, it was only sadness which caused her lips to assume a set firmness, for she had been a widow before she mated with her soldier husband.

CHAPTER NINETEENTH

A COSTLY KISS

IT was a day of bright sunshine in glorious July, yet seemingly the sun did not shine fiercely enough to drive men to seek the shade. The soft air that was wafted over the moors from the distant sea gently ruffled what little water remained in the bed of the river Parret. The tide was nearly at its ebb, and the waters flowed by slowly along the winding and tortuous bed towards the Severn. The breeze was only sufficient to temper the sun's rays and make the atmosphere like that of a mellow day of early spring.

The army of Monmouth lay encamped in the Castle Fields, just by the river's bank. The camp-fires, used for cooking the soldiers' mid-day meals, were still smouldering; on account of the warm sunshine the entrances to the tents lay open to their fullest extent; while the men, women, and children assembled in the fields made the scene full of animation. Yet a quietude pervaded the movements of the people; there was no laughing, shouting, or noise amongst the great crowds gathered together. Conversation was hushed, as within a sacred edifice; war and strife might have been forgotten had the weapons, fashioned to kill, been absent—for it was the Sabbath.

Many soldiers were gathered about in groups, quietly chatting to their comrades or to their women-folk, some of whom had cheerfully walked long distances

and carried their children in order to be able to see those dear to them, whilst the young ones asked questions about the flintlocks they had never seen before, and of which they did not understand the use, or touched in wonderment the swords hanging at their fathers' sides, desiring to know why they carried them, and thinking, no doubt, that they might be some new species of agricultural implement. Many others were resting disconsolately, and looking pensively at their fellows as they thought of the happy children they had left behind, in beautiful verdant Devonshire, when they followed the great Duke who had promised to give them freedom to worship according to their conscience.

At intervals, much larger groups might have been observed, who were not bent on gossip, but were listening attentively to some divine, for the words of the preachers could, every now and again, be heard at a distance as the theme of their discourse moved them to exhortation or denunciation. All the speakers were not men of peace. On a high bank, built by man to keep the river's swift waters in flood-time within its narrow bed, stood a soldier, an officer apparently, who, as he spoke, brandished a naked sword by way of giving greater emphasis to his words. Around him was congregated by far the largest gathering, drawn thither by his loud voice and wild gestures. He was giving out the text of his discourse:

"'The Lord God of gods, the Lord God of gods, He knoweth; and Israel he shall know. If it be rebellion, or if transgression against the Lord, save us not this day!' Rebellion!" he shouted; "it is right to rebel against a bloody tyrant, a murderer, a usurper. Rebellion!" he almost screamed, his voice rising in a hoarse crescendo as he raised aloft in one hand a Bible, "I say that this is our Religion. I say that all

Protestant sects shall be tolerated. I say that this sword shall not be sheathed until James, the arch-traitor to our faith, is punished. I should not have taken up arms and placed a crown upon your beloved Duke's head if it had been rebellion, and had that villain James been your lawful king. I say it is war, a righteous war, a holy war. 'The Lord is a man of war, the Lord is His name.' The same Lord who divided and rolled back the Red Sea, and made a wall of its waters so that His chosen people might pass over its unfathomable depths as on dry land, He will again cause the waves to——"

The speaker paused; there was a movement amongst the crowd.

"See, see, Ferguson!" cried one, "the bore, the bore!" and all turned simultaneously to look at the river. The ebb of the tide had stayed, and there round the bend was the incoming tide, advancing in one mighty, irresistible wave of water.

"An omen!" cried Ferguson triumphantly, a gleam of religious enthusiasm lighting up his face; "the Lord has delivered the enemy into my hands!"

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The parish church of Bridgewater with its tall, slender spire, springing from a high and massive quadrangular tower of red sandstone, is dedicated to St Mary the Virgin. It was but a short while since Ferguson had enthralled his audience with his invective and egotism, yet neither the Church of St Mary, nor its precincts, were being used for worship. In the churchyard, amongst the very tombs themselves, were tethered the horses of Monmouth's cavalry, whilst inside the sacred building men lounged, smoked, joked, and laughed—the angel of Peace had fled. The great oak door with its massive hinges and ponderous lock,

leading to the tower of the church, was open, and standing beneath the finely sculptured archway was Jack Swaine with half-a-dozen companions. They were speaking in whispers, and now and again glanced up the narrow stone staircase which led to the belfry tower, as if expecting someone to descend. In the tower itself was a little narrow room, or stage, formed by the four bare sandstone walls, while high overhead, suspended from the massive beams upon which the dust and dirt of ages rested, hung the church bells that called the living and mourned the dead. The room itself would have been quite dark, but for the small rays of light let in by the tiny fourteenth century windows and a little opening that led out upon the embattled parapet at the base of the spire.

There on the battlements, surrounded by as many of his officers as the cramped space would allow, stood Monmouth. His manner was quiet and dignified, and his face wore the same calm look which always exercised such an extraordinary fascination over those with whom he came into contact; but now there was a pallor upon it that belied the calm exterior. It was the pallor of suppressed excitement. He was listening to the advice of one to whom he seemed to show marked deference.

"See, Sire," the speaker was saying, "the enemy are in three divisions. If those upon the moor are attacked and routed to-night, the horse at Westonzoyland and the militia at Middlezoy will be divided and must retreat or fall into Your Majesty's hands. Moreover, a report came in from Weston this morning that the cavalry are drinking themselves drunk with cider," he continued; "we shall only have to lock up the stable doors, and the men will be captured in their shifts, Sire. Those on the moor, too, will be weary with

their march, and will be less likely to be prepared for a sudden onslaught, and without the assistance of the horse——Your Majesty will perhaps take the telescope, and observe the disposition of the forces," said the speaker, offering it to the Duke.

Monmouth took the proffered glass, and gazed for many minutes in the direction indicated. No one spoke, save the officer who handed the instrument to the Duke, and that was only to remind him of what he had himself observed when making a similar inspection. At last the glass was lowered, and all waited for Monmouth to speak as they looked at their leader intently; but the gaze of many eyes did not seem to disconcert him.

"How many men do you reckon are on the moor?" he said at last.

"About four thousand, we estimate, Sire; and one of the regiments would appear to be Dumbarton's," was the answer.

"I know those men," the Duke remarked quietly, and he paused before he continued, "they will fight, and we had better make them fight to-night."

At the rear of this group, just by the opening on the parapet, was Captain Annersley. His face was gloomy, but as he heard the last words it seemed to brighten, and, turning round, he hastened down the dark and winding steps of the tower. He found Jack waiting for him in the porch below.

"It's settled, Jack, at last: we are to give battle to them—to-night. I pray that this decision is not too late; it is our only chance. See that every man is in camp and in readiness; but tell them not the reason. I will soon rejoin thee." He broke off hurriedly, and a moment afterwards had again disappeared up the tower steps.

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"Jack, Jack!" said a voice at Swaine's side, as he was proceeding through the town to the camp.

"Kate, my girl, is it 'ee?" answered the other, stopping to speak with his cousin; "why, I did not know that 'ee was in Bridgewater."

"Yes, Jack," answered the girl; "I came in to see mother, and to hear if there was any news. I am going back to-morrow. What a lot of people there are about, Jack! Why, if it was not for the soldiers it would be like a fête day, for everyone seems to be in town.

"Yes," replied Jack, "there du zeem to be a tidy lot here, and I be mighty glad to zee 'ee to-day, for I don't know where we may all be to-morrow," he added significantly; but his tone conveyed no meaning to his listener.

"I hear, Jack, that they be all going back to Taunton to-morrow, and, if so be, I shall get thy mother to go over and see thee," continued Kate.

"Maybe we shall, maybe we shan't," answered Jack vaguely; "but is my mother well? Tell her I am in good spirits and like soldiering," he added.

"I shall tell her, Jack, that you will be glad to go back to her and the old Mill; the place does seem deserted without thee," said Kate in a tender tone.

"Yes, Kate, tell her that, tell her that," said the other, trying to keep down a lump in his throat, and as he said it, Jack stepped on one side to allow a tall, gaunt soldier to pass him; but the man, as he did so, stopped and laid his hand upon Swaine's arm.

"To-night," he said, with a far-off, absent look upon his face, "ye shall not shout, nor make any noise with your voice; nor shall any word proceed out of your mouth!" And then he passed on with a mysterious air.

"Who is that, Jack?" asked Kate, as soon as the stranger was out of hearing, for she was startled at his strange manner.

"That be Ferguson, Kate; zome du zay that he be mad; take no notice of him," Swaine replied, trying to pass the matter over.

"But he is dressed as an officer; he must mean something. Tell me, Jack, what did he mean about to-night?"

Jack paused, and looked down at the little figure by his side. The large, inquiring eyes of the girl looked full into his. He could not lie to her.

"Tell me, Jack, tell me," she pleaded, while he hesitated like Samson of old, who loved a woman in the valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah, and he said:

"Kate, my child, the militia be at Westonzoyland, and the King's men be encamped on the moor. I think we be going to surprise and attack them to-night."

"The militia men, Jack! are you sure it's the militia men?" exclaimed Kate in great agitation, for she knew that Sir Mark was serving with the militia, and the thought made her feel so ill that she clutched hold of Jack for support. "Oh, Jack, what will you do, what will you do? I know they will kill you, kill you, Jack!" she exclaimed hysterically.

"No, lass, we shall kill them," Swaine replied, a feeling of great joy taking possession of him as he thought that, after all, his becoming a soldier was bringing this young girl's heart nearer to him "Would you be sorry, child, if they did kill me?" he asked tenderly.

"Jack, thou knowest that I love thee," was her only answer.

"Then pray for me, child, for to-night there will be

bloody work. Wilt thou let me kiss thee?" and he bent low and imprinted a kiss upon the girl's forehead.

She lifted her arms to his neck and returned his kiss. Was Delilah to betray Samson? She knew not. "He will kill him, kill him," she thought as she left Swaine, and walked with mind distracted towards the "Lamb." It was only a farewell kiss, that was all, and there were many farewell embraces that night, and many partings.

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Kate had seen her mother.

Mistress Coombs could not have been more busy. If she had been possessed of a dozen pairs of hands, she would have found occupation for them all. The inn was crowded, and there was little time for the exchange of affectionate greeting—in fact, there was no time, for she was being called here and there and everywhere by the thirsty customers.

"I am glad you have come, for now 'ee can lend me a hand. Go quickly and take off thy things!" she exclaimed hurriedly, as she endeavoured to satisfy some of the most impatient of her customers.

When Kate was in her room, she closed the door, in order to try to shut out the noise from below. The careless, thoughtless shouting appeared to mock her. How unreal everything seemed! Why, some of these men would shortly be killing—killing men—or would perhaps themselves be killed. How hot and stifling the room felt! No! she could not go down and help. Rest, rest, that was what she wanted. Why had she come to Bridgewater? How she longed for her own little room at the Mill, and to tell her great fear to Mistress Grace. If she could only see her mother for

a few moments alone, she would confess everything, and she would surely let her remain by herself. "Pray for me, child, for to-night there will be bloody work." Yes, she would pray—pray that Jack might be spared—pray that her lover might be saved—pray that her mother might forgive her. She flung herself on her knees at the side of the bed, and poured out to God, amidst stifling sobs, all her troubles, all her sins; and the confession seemed to bring happiness with it, for she remained kneeling as one in a dream, apparently oblivious to the hubbub below.

Kate gave a start as if consciousness had suddenly returned. Someone was ascending the old, wooden, creaking staircase. She arose from the side of the bed and stood facing the door; she knew it was her mother come to see what had delayed her. Yes, now she would tell her everything, and ask forgiveness, advice, and counsel. The door only half opened, and Mistress Coombs peered in.

"Come, Kate, come, thou hast been a mighty long time; ain't 'ee ready yet?"

"I durst not come, mother; I cannot," Kate faltered.

"Art 'ee ill, child?" asked the mother, coming into the room, her hot and excited face showing what a labour her work had been, her manner and question betraying some tenderness.

"No, mother dear, but I cannot serve; I——"

The brow of Mistress Coombs darkened in a moment.

"Cannot serve? Just what I thought; a vine lady, forzooth. This is all your aunt's doing with her grand notions, a-dressing thee up in these gew-gaws. A dutiful daughter I've got, to be zure—a lazy huzzy. Dost thou hear me, child?" she exclaimed, raising her voice; "'ee art a lazy huzzy."

"Mother," moaned Kate, covering her face with both hands.

"Mother!" shrieked Mistress Coombs in great indignation, summoning up a reserve of strength as she uttered the word, and her reserve of strength was always considerable, "mother, indeed! don't mother me; thou art a lazy huzzy. A lazy huzzy," she repeated as she turned upon her heel; "huzzy," she added as she banged the door behind her; "huzzy," she exclaimed as she descended the stairs.

Kate hardly heard what was said, but as the door was closing she made a step forward and would have flung her arms around her mother's neck. It was too late: she was alone again with her guilty sorrow unconfessed, whilst the energies and thoughts of Mistress Coombs were soon completely occupied and engulfed in the vortex below.

CHAPTER TWENTIETH — *SEDGEMOOR PAST AND PRESENT*

AN inhabitant of the city, seated by his fireside on a wild winter's evening, with the rain dashing in torrents against the window-panes and the wind howling down the chimney, would, in all probability turn involuntarily in his seat to assure himself that the door was securely fastened, if the subject of conversation happened to be directed upon one or other of the desolate moorlands which are scattered about at intervals over the British Isles. First of all, a feeling of vague uneasiness would come over him as he pictured to himself one of those lonely tracts of country on such a night, to be succeeded by a sense of absolute comfort and safety as he felt the genial warmth of the fire, and viewed with satisfaction the stability of the walls surrounding him. But no such feelings as these would be experienced by a true Somerset man, more particularly if he happened to be a Southerner, for then he would have been born on the moors, have lived on the moors, and in all probability expect, like his fathers, to be buried on the moors, where, upon a little green island of rising ground a church, marked by a tall, solid-looking tower, with a few tiny, white-washed cottages clustering around its base, formed a village, certain to be called "Zoy" something or other—the

word denoting that at some time the spot had been surrounded by waves.

There are, perhaps, a dozen or more of these diminutive hamlets dotted here and there over the moorlands, and each parish seems to claim by right a special moor of its own. The exact boundaries of these can, however, be known to the inhabitants alone, for a stranger would find it a matter of impossibility to decide where one moor commenced and another ended—the whole of the country around presenting the appearance of one vast tract of low-lying ground.

But the hamlets? Yes, we had almost forgotten them. Although they are built upon rising ground, this fact might be easily overlooked, so insignificant are the eminences, and in the winter-time many of the cottagers seek sanctuary in vain from the all-pervading floods whose waters form a natural resort for the wild duck and slender snipe that congregate in this congenial neighbourhood.

Tradition has it that in this part of the country King Alfred the Great found a safe hiding-place from the invading Danes. That it was once a vast swamp overgrown with jungle, and swarming with big game, there can be no manner of doubt. Much controversy has arisen among geologists as to whether the Severn Sea itself did not once claim these very moors for its bed, some of the experts pointing to the shells and other marine formations in support of this theory, whilst others aver equally emphatically that the only time the sea flowed over this district was in the days of Noah.

The farmers, overburdened with taxes, never complain (although there are those who say that this class is not descended from Job), neither do they take any

interest in the theories advanced by scientists, for they know, unfortunately, only too well that the floods will come despite that Science has stepped in and given them Drainage Commissioners, who endeavour to prevent their recurrence. Still, after they have been flooded out, when they reluctantly pay their cess, they begin to think that it was a misfortune that prevented the individual to whom the Commissioners owe their origin from being swallowed up by the destroying element.

Two hundred years ago, Sedgemoor in the dry season looked very much as it does at the present time. Science, it is true, had then only imperfectly, or rather less imperfectly, done its work, and the moor was not intersected with quite so many deep and wide rhines as it is now, nor were there so many formidable embankments. In those days, the narrow lanes leading to the meadows were left entirely to the drying influence of the sun to absorb the superabundant moisture and make them passable. The pastures were not quite so rich, nor were so many waving corn-fields to be seen, but as the springtime came round, and the waters receded from the moors into their proper channels to pursue their sluggish course, the grass would once more resume its luxuriant growth, the cattle be brought down from the hills to fatten on Nature's abundance, and what had but a few weeks previously been an ice-bound waste would become an earthly Paradise.

The evening shadows fell, the sun gradually lost its power as it sank behind the western hills, the weary husbandman left off his daily toil, and passed homewards through the grey mist which rose to cover the land as with a mysterious pall, and a deathlike silence crept over the great plain—a silence unbroken

save for the occasional bleating of sheep, or the lowing of cattle as they lay down for the night, or perhaps the peculiar cry of the plover as it circled overhead preparatory to settling on a spot chosen for its solitude as a fitting resting-place. So night closed on Sedgemoor—Sedgemoor in the time of peace; Sedgemoor on the eve of a morrow that would change it into a field of blood and carnage on which many a brave West-country man would fall—to rise no more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIRST

TO-MORROW

FOR a minute or so after the door had closed behind Mistress Coombs, Kate stood eagerly listening to her mother's footsteps as she descended the creaking staircase, hoping against hope that she might repent of her harsh words and return. How the poor grief-stricken girl longed for a gentle word, a loving look, from the only being she had the right to look to in this, her hour of sorrow; how she yearned for a mother's advice, a mother's comfort. She longed to bury her weary young head on her parent's bosom and unburden the innermost secrets of her soul. But no; her hopes were vain. The footsteps gradually died away in the distance, the sound of boisterous laughter from below fell on her ears, and with a heartrending groan of despair she sank again upon her knees, and buried her face in her hands.

Suddenly her cousin's words flashed through her mind, and with a start, she sprang to her feet. How selfish she was, thinking of her own sorrows only! Yes; she remembered the King's soldiers were at Westonzoyland. They were to be surprised and attacked that very night. The King's soldiers! And Sir Mark was with them! An awful feeling of dread seemed to freeze the very marrow in her bones.

What if the rebels should succeed, and her lover were killed? She almost shrieked at the bare idea. What could she do to warn him? She must think, think; and she pressed her hands against her throbbing temples as if to aid her in her purpose. She must warn him; he must be saved—saved at all hazards, if it cost her her life. She knew the road to Weston well; it was but four or five miles there, she thought, as she paced the room distractedly. She could run there in an hour. She would be in time then, for Monmouth's soldiers would not leave Bridgewater until near midnight. Her mother was far too busy with the thirsty crowd below to miss her; it was not likely she would come up to her room again; and before the soldiers left for the attack, she would be back without anybody being the wiser.

The evening shadows were gathering fast, when, quickly drawing her cloak over her head, she opened the door and listened for a moment at the top of the staircase. Could she pass down unseen by her mother? Softly she descended two or three steps, and listened again. There was so much shouting and talking below, that she ventured to creep down still further. She could see her mother engrossed in serving the clamorous crowd. Her face was towards Kate, but presently she turned her back. Then swiftly the girl seized her opportunity, and was out in the street, panting and breathless, in less time than it takes to write these words.

Even then her fears were not allayed. Supposing she met Jack, what excuse should she make him? She must chance that. Her mind was made up: her lover must be warned at all hazards. It was dusk, and the streets were crowded with men, women, and children, a circumstance that greatly helped the

girl in her design to pass out of the town unrecognised.

Only a moment did she hesitate, and that was to take one last look at the "Lamb." Through the kitchen window she could see the interior, crowded now almost to suffocation. She called to mind the happy time she had spent in that very room, but a few weeks previously, on that never-to-be-forgotten May-day. There was the old porch. She could almost see Jack standing by the cart that was to take them home, and her mother handing the parcels, each with its message for her aunt at the Mill. It was only a moment, but it all flashed through her mind like a dream. Tears filled her eyes as she turned away, and the old inn was soon lost to sight. She quickly made her way past the Island; with difficulty she struggled through the concourse of folks who were gathered round the Cross; and passing over the bridge, soon found herself in Eastover.

No longer hindered by the press of the multitude, she walked along the deserted road at a swift pace. Soon the houses became fewer, and the distance between each greater. Still she hurried on; the gathering darkness having no fears for her, so strong was her determination to carry out her object and warn her lover. Suddenly she came upon a fire, right in the centre of the road, around which a group of Monmouth's soldiers were gathered. The girl's heart sank within her as the doubt crossed her mind whether she would be allowed to pass the outpost. What should she do? She hesitated a moment, and then remembered that about half-a-mile further along the road a farm was situated, the last dwelling before the moor was reached. She knew the owner;

he was a patron of the "Lamb," so should she be asked any questions, she resolved to say she had business at the farm, and surely they would allow her to proceed. With this intention she continued her journey. As she neared the soldiers, one stepped forward and politely informed her that unless she wished to be made prisoner by Fairfax's men, she had best retrace her steps.

"If you please, sir," answered Kate, with beating heart, "I want to go to Farmer Jarman's; it is but half-a-mile farther on, and the road, I am told, is safe that far; besides, I fear not Fairfax's men," she concluded courageously.

"Bravely spoken, my lass," said the soldier who had addressed her.

"By my troth," chimed in another, "if it be not the daughter of Mistress Coombs of the 'Lamb.'"

"You be right, there, Abraham," exclaimed a third, who appeared to be a sergeant. "Let the lass pass," he continued. And the girl, waiting no further permission, sped on, trembling in every limb.

The excitement of the incident had unnerved her, and, as soon as she was out of sight of the soldiers, she commenced to run. The road was terribly dark, for the hedges were high on either side just there. As yet she had not come to Farmer Jarman's, but she could see the house in the distance, with a little speck of light shining in one of the windows. It was a welcome beacon, and it gave her courage as she hurried along in the darkness. Soon this kindly light was reached, and passed, and only the open moor lay before her, dark and dreary, an apparently trackless waste. Had she gone half-way, she wondered. The stillness of the road here, which

even in the day-time was lonely in the extreme, awed her, and made her heart beat fast as she sped towards her destination. To make matters worse, a thick, damp mist had risen with the darkness, and the few trees scattered here and there came suddenly upon her like spectres out of the night, causing her to start every time she passed one. Her limbs, with the lengthy run, were growing weary; she was getting out of breath; she must stop, she felt, if it were only for a moment.

Somewhat recovered by a short rest, she continued her journey. How long the road was, and how rough! Suddenly she twisted her ankle in a sun-baked cart rut, and cried out in the agony of her soul at this fresh misfortune.

"I must—I will save him," she murmured through her clenched teeth, and the very consciousness of his danger gave her renewed strength as she stumbled along. Would the road never come to an end. "Mark, Mark," groaned the exhausted girl, as she burst into tears, "I cannot go much further, dear; come to me, Mark, come to——"

What was that she heard? Her heart seemed to stay its laboured beating, and her sobs ceased. She hesitated, not knowing whether to proceed or to retrace her steps. Something moved but a few paces from her. Her heart leapt into her mouth, and she grew hot and cold by turns. But it was only a water-rat, nearly as frightened as herself, that had run from the centre of the road and popped with a splash into the ditch at the side, so suddenly had she come upon him.

Kate never knew what the sound was, so she flew on and on, forgetting the pain, forgetting the weariness of her aching limbs, miles and miles it seemed to her, over

that desolate moor. The echo of her own footsteps conjured up in her heated imagination the idea that she was being pursued. Still one thought only was uppermost in her mind. She must—she would save the man she loved.

Surely she must be nearing Westonzoyland, for the mist seemed to be clearing off, and she could feel that the ground she was traversing was rising slightly.

"Who goes there? Who are you for?" rang out in the still night air.

"Why, bless my drink-money if it bean't a girl," said another voice.

Kate wept for joy as she discovered a group of soldiers in front of her.

"Oh, kind sirs," said the panting girl, "I wish to be directed to Sir Mark Noble. He is with the King's soldiers at Westonzoyland."

"What want you with him at this time of the night, my pretty lass?" queried the soldier she had addressed, who was evidently the one in authority.

"I wish to see Sir Mark on a very urgent matter, and I pray you will direct me to him," answered Kate.

"Are you sure that the little she-rebel don't want to see me, Adam Rae?" said a round, red-faced man, he who had discovered Kate's sex.

"I—am—no—rebel, sir," Kate meekly stammered.

This reply seemed to nonplus the men somewhat, for they held a whispered conversation, the purport of which appeared to be that they ought to take her to the officers' quarters. So to the officers' quarters she went, under Adam Rae's guidance.

The girl followed her conductor some three or four hundred yards past several white cottages from which the sounds of singing, shouting, and laughing were issuing. She knew this hilarity did not proceed from

the rightful occupiers of the dwellings, but from the soldiers who were their temporary tenants, and her courage began to desert her.

At length her companion stopped before the door of what she recognised as the inn of the hamlet. It was more brilliantly illuminated than any of the houses they had passed, and the inmates, who were singing or rather shouting a rollicking drinking chorus, appeared to be thoroughly enjoying themselves, their thick and unmelodious voices betraying the fact that they had been drinking heavily.

The guide knocked at the door, which on being opened disclosed a room, similar in appearance to the kitchen at Ashton Mill, in which at least twenty men sat or reclined in various attitudes. On the mantelshelf over the huge fireplace a dozen candles were burning and spluttering away.

As Adam Rae entered, followed by the trembling figure of Kate Fletcher, a dead silence fell upon the noisy revellers who appeared astounded at the intrusion. But it was only a momentary lull, and the uproar broke out again with renewed violence, nearly drowning the voice of the one who shouted:

"Adam Rae, what have you got there, you blushing dolt?"

Kate's companion appeared to feel the awkwardness of the situation. He made no reply, but stood grinning with a semi-idiotic expression upon his unintelligent face.

The question was repeated, and would have remained unanswered, had not one of the officers, more intoxicated than his companions, flung an ill-directed missile at the grinning Adam, with an oath and the injunction:

"Speak up, you ape-faced fool."

All this time Kate stood watching the flushed countenances around her with a timid, frightened look.

"She came over from Bridgewater to-night, sir, and says as how she wants to see Sir Mark Noble, or some such person, and the name not being beknown to us we thought as how she had better be brought here, and here she be," concluded Rae, with another imbecile grin.

"Here, lads," said the officer who had first spoken, "don't all claim the pretty wench at once. Which of you is Sir Mark Noble?"

"Ah, it's me the pretty maid wants," said another man, rising and staggering towards her, "ain't it, my dear?" he questioned with a drunken leer.

"Indeed, sir, I know you not," answered the girl simply, as she shrank on one side.

Kate's answer caused a shout of uproarious mirth, and her questioner was pulled back violently into his seat. This treatment made him very quarrelsome, and he would have struck Adam Rae, who still continued to grin, had he not been restrained by his companions.

"Here, my dear," said the first speaker, as he approached Kate, and putting his hand under her chin, snatched a hurried kiss from the upturned face, a feat which met with a round of applause; "Sir Mark, or whatever you call him, isn't here. Maybe he's with the King's militia at Middlezoy. What want you with him, my lass? A love-meeting, I'll be bound. But we be all admirers of a pretty face, and so you need not be disappointed of thy tryst—need she, lads?"

A shout of approval greeted the speaker's remarks.

"It be no love-making," answered Kate, blushing scarlet.

"Come, now, gentlemen, let's drink her health for

calling upon us," said the officer. "Here's to the maid we all do love."

The toast was drunk with avidity, and the whole company joined in singing the chorus of a ribald song about a bashful maid and an amorous friar.

"Here's another toast," said the man who had been laughed down.

"Another toast," they all shouted; "hold him up, boys, hold him up."

Whether it was the clumsy manner in which he was held up, or whether it was intended for the toast, nobody knew, but he shouted: "the Devil!" and all the goblets were emptied amid much hilarity.

"Now, my dear, tell us," said the first speaker, "what is it that you want with Sir Mark?"

The girl, now thoroughly frightened, cast a glance at the sea of faces before her, as she answered in terror:

"I come, sir, to say that the Duke's men will attack to-night."

"Attack us to-night, my girl? ha, ha, ha! I like that. Why, the louts cannot handle a sword, let alone a flintlock. Pooh, pooh, girl, you like not our company, but you will, my pretty lass, when you know us better," he added, as he made another attempt to kiss her. She drew back, covering her face with her hands, as she answered:

"It is true, sir, I swear it. Even if you believe me not, I pray you will let me go."

"Go, girl? so soon, and while the night is yet young? Come, drink with us; we be mighty pleasant company, you'll find. Now, then, Adam Rae," he added to that worthy, whose face seemed larger and redder than ever, as he stood watching his superiors enjoying themselves, "take your lumbering lazy carcass off,

and quickly too; and if any of those yokels come this way, tell them to go back, unless they come for rope to hang themselves, when you can let them have it. Now, be off."

"I must go too, sir!" exclaimed Kate, as she turned to follow the man who had just been dismissed.

"Go, girl? so you shall," he replied, seizing her wrists, and pulling her from the door.

"Oh, sir, pray let me go now," pleaded the terrified girl.

"You shall go, girl," he answered hoarsely, and she felt his hot breath on her cheek, "you shall go *to-morrow*."

. . . . . .

O god of war, to whom the heathen prayed, call off thy fiends! Have pity! have mercy!

Mercy in war? Thou fool! Pray to thy Christian God for peace, for in war man is no longer human.

. . . . . .

To-morrow! To-morrow! A desolate road across the moorland, skirted on either side by a deep ditch, from which tall, lank reeds spring in profusion, while along the road's bank, at almost regular intervals, stunted willows grow, a rim of mud on their rugged trunks, marking the rise and fall of the winter floods.

There are no floods now to cover those sloping banks, whose softness forms a fitting couch for the reclining figure of a girl, a mere child in face. One little hand clutches the sun-baked turf, whilst the other, clenched, oh! so tightly, lies on the fair young bosom.

A gentle breeze stirs the tall, green reeds, which bow their heads submissively. It wafts the long, dark curls over the waxen face, beautiful in its calm

repose, a face from which has fled the terror of a few short hours ago.

The large, dark eyes are open, and gaze straight into the glare of a July sun, as if piercing the depths of a world beyond. Those eyes from which the tears of shame are but lately dried, eyes that in this world will weep no more, either for joy or for sorrow. The figure does not stir. Still the sun shines on in all its fierceness, the gaudy dragon-fly with its tinsel wings flits up and down the sluggish and weedy ditch, and the air is full of insect life. The lark in a meadow hard by still sings his joyous song, as he rises heavenwards; it is a song of peace for a soul at rest.

Kate Fletcher is dead!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SECOND

A NIGHT OF HORROR

MINE Host of the "Lamb" stood in his parlour, intently gazing upon an old and somewhat rusty sword, that had now hung for many a year undisturbed over the fire-place. Countless were the tales of heroism told by the worthy man about this trusty weapon, which, according to its owner, had been dyed with the gore of all who had come within the reach of the arm that wielded it. Yes; John felt the old sword must be brought down from its resting-place, for had he not volunteered (in a weak moment, perhaps) his services in the Duke's cause; and had not Captain Annersley, with a cordial grasp of the hand, called him a good fellow, and eagerly accepted them? He must put the best face upon matters, and trust in Providence. With these thoughts in his mind, he reached down the companion of his soldiering days, and with a deeply-heaved sigh, commenced to slowly rub a whetstone over its rusty surface.

"Must 'ee really go to-night, John?" said Mistress Coombs, who had just entered, and stood watching her noble spouse engaged in his warlike preparations.

"Must I go?" repeated Coombs in a tone of assumed astonishment, as he continued the sharpening process with increased vigour. "Must I go? Why, woman, what be 'ee thinking about? Go? Of course I must. Has a Coombs ever been known

to break his plighted word? Never! Could a Coombs sit idly by with the smell of powder in the air, with the roar of the cannon in his ears, knowing his countrymen were laying down their lives for a just and righteous cause? Never! I say, never!!" and he savagely brandished the weapon he held.

Mistress Coombs was quite carried away by her husband's valorous bearing. She had hitherto listened to his tales of heroism with a certain amount of suspicion, even, she regretted to own it, with a tinge of disbelief. She had evidently wronged him, and felt a bit ashamed of herself, as she said:

"Perhaps you be right, John, but remember there will be slaughter, and if 'ee vell I could not carry on this business without 'ee."

"Eh, that may be zo," answered the other, pleased to hear his wife acknowledge that he was of some use to her, "but a man must think of his country avore even his wife or his business. If I vall, I vall in a good cause. I have vought before, and never got zo much as a scratch. No, no, John Coombs," he went on, resuming the sharpening of his sword, as if there were no time to lose, "never let it be said you shirked duty. You must bear up, my dear; my place is on the battlefield."

"The moors be turr'ble bleak and dreary, John, and you be sure to catch your death o' cold, vor your chest be weak. If zo be you've made up your mind to go, I'd best brew 'ee something, John, something that will keep the cold out," said Mistress Coombs.

John had often heard of Master Fletcher's weak chest, for it was consumption that had been the cause of his demise, and it was the only characteristic about his predecessor of which he approved. The suggestion, though, that his own lung power was

impaired, would have startled him, had it not been accompanied by an intimation so entirely in concord with his feelings.

"Well, my dear, zince you be zo kind, I'll take a drop of nice punch; it will make me think of 'ee when I am in peril on the moor; it will brace me up like. Nice and hot, mind; nice and hot," he shouted after his partner, as she left the room.

John Coombs, as soon as his wife had gone, relapsed into a brown study. How fond he was of everything around him! His eye rested upon a gay wool-worked picture of a tempest-tossed barque, ploughing its way across a bright, emerald-green sea, supposed to be lashed into fury by the wind emanating from the fat cheeks of a number of winged cherubs, who were located in a sky of a blue that Nature has never been successful in imitating. Many a time, after a mug or two of cider, had he dilated upon the beauties of this highly artistic production, and expatiated upon its realistic merits. The noise and clatter in the kitchen and passages somehow did not harmonise with his mental condition that night, and caused him to shift uneasily in his seat. He saw nothing to talk and laugh about. His chair was comfortable, and he never remembered feeling its high back and gaudy patchwork cushion so easy as they were to him then. He was just beginning to feel that, perhaps, if it had not been for the blood of his forefathers, he might have hesitated ere he quitted his comfortable home for the battlefield, when his good wife returned, bearing a steaming bowl in her hands.

"Here it be, John," she said, placing the beverage before him. "Now mind 'ee take a good drop. I must leave 'ee, as there be a mighty lot clamouring to be zerved."

"How kind she is to-night!" thought John as his wife left the room, and he bent over the brew and stirred it with a large wooden spoon. Then he poured some of the liquid into a cup to test it A sipping noise, then a gurgling, soon followed; it tasted even better than it smelt; he felt warm and comfortable already. The cup was filled and emptied again and again. Coombs was soon at peace with everybody. The King's and the Duke's men were his boon companions. The moors might have been the plains of Palestine, overflowing with milk and honey and — punch. Nobody could make punch like Mistress Coombs.

"Blest if they can," he said aloud as he took up the bowl itself, and drained it to the dregs.

The hostess was busy in the kitchen when Jack Swaine entered, closely followed by Annersley.

"Where be Jan, aunt?" said Swaine, "it be time vor us to go. The men be ready and be mustering in the streets—and where be Kate?" he added anxiously.

"She be out a zight-zeeing," was the answer, given in a somewhat scornful tone, "and John 'e be in the parlour," and there was a look of triumph upon her face as the two men passed out of the room to fetch her soldier husband. She felt proud of him just then. They would find him prepared.

"Come, Jan, we be all ready," exclaimed Swaine hurriedly, as he entered the parlour.

Coombs, to do him justice, was anxious and willing to do anything and everything, but somehow he felt his inability to move, and so he simply sat with a complacent smile over-spreading his ruddy countenance, and gazed in an imbecile manner at the two men who had come to fetch him.

"John Coombs," said Annersley severly as he advanced to where the landlord was seated and

laid his hand violently upon that worthy's shoulder, "you are drunk, man, drunk." But the host of the "Lamb" simply smiled more benignly than ever, and his tongue wandered aimlessly around his lips as if he felt it only wanted a little moisture to enable him to explain to his own satisfaction the position in which they found him. "Jack," continued Annersley with an air of disgust, "we must not waste further time with this lout; it is useless." Coombs spluttered and rolled his head, vainly endeavouring to protest against this description of himself.

Turning on his heel, followed by Swaine, Annersley strode angrily from the apartment, leaving the incapacitated host to dream of the execution he was doing on the moors with the sword he had been at such pains to make ready for the fray, but which was destined to return to its old resting-place over the mantel-shelf without having been drawn in a cause that its owner had expressed his intention of dying for, should Fate so decree. It appeared, however, that Fate did not so decree, but left John Coombs to sleep away the hours whilst his fellow-countrymen were shedding their life's blood within a few miles of his resting-place.

Outside, the night was dark, but the moon was just rising. The streets were crowded, the windows of most of the houses were open, and every casement was filled with spectators, eager to catch a glimpse of all that was taking place outside.

The reflection of the lights within, and the rays cast by the numberless lanthorns and links held by those assembled on either side of the streets, but imperfectly showed up the long line of scythe-men in the centre of the roadway. Yet it was sufficient to make the sharpened edges of the medley of weapons

gleam in the uncertain light causing the bearers to look even a more imposing body of men than the better trained troops, the Blues, the Reds, or the Yellows.

Although the whole scene was an animated one, a deep silence prevailed everywhere as Captain Annersley and Swaine walked with the men to the assembling-ground in the Castle Fields. Some remained behind to take a last farewell of their wives and children, but soon even these few stragglers joined the moving throng.

Directly the fields were reached, the men fell into their places with very little confusion, and there they stood grimly and silently awaiting orders.

It wanted but an hour to midnight when a murmur arose from the ranks, and the fighting men stood at attention.

The gates of the castle had been flung open, and two horsemen rode forth, accompanied by an imposing *posse* of mounted men. The leading horseman looked neither to the right nor to the left. His eyes were fixed steadfastly in front of him as if he were in deep thought. His face was pale and his features set. He looked truly a leader of men. The man who rode immediately behind him appeared to be proferring advice to which the other replied in monosyllables. The men, as they recognised the pale, handsome face, silently but lovingly saluted their leader, for they knew him to have been foremost in many a successful siege and many a hard-fought battle; but not a drum beat nor was a word spoken; silence and dumb show appeared to be the chief factors in that impressive drama.

None needed to be told that the rider at the head of the approaching horsemen was King Monmouth.

As soon as he had passed along the length of the footmen he reined up his steed and turning to the horseman who had previously addressed him, he said simply, "Soho." Immediately the other gave it to the men as a command, and the word was taken up like an echo along the lines. It was the password that they might know one another in the dark. In the man who had passed the word to the troops, Annersley recognised Lord Grey, and his heart misgave him as he called to mind that nobleman's cowardice, and saw that he had been given the command of the cavalry. But as they went by the Duke at a brisk walk, some six hundred strong, to take the lead in the night's work, he noticed the strength of the serviceable colts, and the muscular build of the sturdy yeomen who bestrode them, and his confidence returned. When the cavalry had passed, the Duke himself took his place at the head of the footmen, and the whole army was soon in motion.

There was no cheering as the troops passed along the river's bank, no shouting, naught but tearful farewells and stifled sobs from the women folk, tears and sobs drowned by the tramp, tramp, of the many feet that echoed and vibrated between the overhanging buildings in the streets they were leaving behind them, as Monmouth's devoted army of rustics marched out to the moor to give battle to the well-trained troops of King James. When the sound of the footsteps died away in the distance, the streets became gradually deserted, save for a few women who had gathered here and there in small groups to discuss, in awe-struck whispers, the coming fight.

It was just midnight, the moon was at its full,

and the stars shone brightly as the silent army passed out of the town. The direct road to the moor that had been taken by Kate Fletcher but a few hours previously was avoided, and, led by Bejamin Newton, the guide, the horse and foot turned into Bradney Lane, and thence by way of March Lane, which was so narrow that the troops in passing along were compelled to break their formation. It was with full hearts and no lack of determination that these brave fellows marched along between the high hedgerows to meet the forces of His Majesty the King.

As the low-lying ground was reached, the marsh fogs rose up on all sides, rendering progress more difficult than ever. It was impossible for the eye to penetrate, even to the extent of a few yards, the grey pall which enveloped all. The light of the moon above was but a dull lamp that served only to materialise the murky atmosphere, and render the men like so many spectres of the night as they pushed their way blindly forward.

At length the first halt was made, in order to allow those in front to slowly pass over what Swaine recognised as the Black Ditch. "Only Langmoor Rhyne to cross," he thought to himself, "and we shall be upon them." If he could but distinguish himself in the coming fight, what would it mean to him? He wondered why he had not seen Kate. Perhaps she could not find him on account of the great crowd in the fields. He felt sure she was at last beginning to like him a little. Yes; in time he would make her love him.

The men were not moving quickly enough to please him. He grasped his sword in order to restrain his pent-up excitement, and held his breath to prevent himself from speaking.

Now they had stopped again, and there was another delay.

Was it the wide and deep Langmoor Rhyne?

For the first time during that long and arduous march, silence was broken. It was whispered that the guide had missed the crossing in the darkness.

"It be higher up, zir, I be zure; I know the place well," said Swaine to Annersley.

"Higher up, higher up," ran along the line to those in front. Again the soldiers were upon the moor. The crossing-place was at length found, but the delay had caused confusion.

Annersley now heard a sound that dismayed him; it was the sharp crack of a pistol, sounding like a cannon shot in the still morning air. He knew that it might imperil the success of the surprise. All hastened to cross the rhyne. There was a volley of shots, and the roll of drums announcing that the enemy had been put on their guard and that the intended surprise had failed.

There was no time for regrets, for Monmouth's clear voice was heard commanding the cavalry to advance, and both Annersley and Swaine knew that the fight had commenced. The battle-cry of "God with us" rose from hundreds of throats, followed by the firing of many muskets and carbines.

It was a great relief to Annersley when the order was given for the infantry to advance, and with a loud cheer for King Monmouth, the troops pushed forward. Annersley led his company at a quick double across the moor to meet their invisible foe. Suddenly he cried, "Halt!" for in front of him he perceived a deep ditch, that it would have been folly to have attempted to wade in the darkness.

"A ditch! Swaine, a ditch!" he exclaimed aghast.

"Eh, zir, it be the Bussex Rhyne, bad luck to 'em, they be on t'other zide; the vord be nigh half a mile vrom here, up where the horsemen be," was the answer.

It was quite true; this impassable barrier had been overlooked. Voices could now be distinctly heard from the opposite bank, and many dark objects were seen to be moving about in the gloom beyond. Annersley, believing the horsemen were making their passage across the ford, drew up his men, and gave the order to fire a volley across the rhyne. There was a rattle of musketry, followed by the cries of the wounded, and the groans of the dying, mingled with shouts of derision and muttered curses. Now a volley was returned, and for a few moments nothing was heard save the roar of musketry. Many fell on both sides, yet neither appeared to gain any advantage. Day was about to break, already the mist showed signs of dispersing, and as Annersley looked around him, he saw that the major portion of the Duke's cavalry had fled the field after being met by the King's troops at the ford. Upon his right he could see a small band of horsemen vainly endeavouring to stay the rush of the Horse Guards that had just come up from Westonzoyland. Their efforts proved fruitless, and they were soon in full flight before the King's men. He knew right well that these horsemen would before long be available to attack them upon the moor, whilst the King's Blues had already crossed the rhyne lower down and were preparing to attack them on the left. It was this attack that his division must meet.

At last they would be able to come to close quarters; it was Monmouth's last chance to drive the King's forces back over the rhyne.

The Duke, excellent general that he was, quickly saw his opportunity, and placing his men in order, charged with his wonted gallantry at the head of his infantry, straight at the advancing Blues. They wavered and broke in disorder before the fierce onslaught of the Taunton men, but as the horsemen wheeled off they disclosed Dumbarton's troops behind them, with matches lighted, prepared to attack.

Quickly the Duke's ranks closed up to cope with this fresh danger; but there was a still further disaster to befall them, for a horseman approached the Duke, and cried in a voice that Annersley could distinctly hear:

"All is lost, and it is time for you to shift for yourself." What was said in reply, Annersley did not catch, for Dumbarton's troops were already upon them.

No yeoman ever wielded a flail with more skill and energy, none with greater strength, than Jack Swaine laid about him with his sword. Annersley had not taught his follower the art of swordsmanship in vain.

There was a disposition on the part of the men who confronted him to avoid the young giant, for he cut down every one who came within reach of his weapon. Like one mad, he was deaf to the agonizing cries of the wounded, blind to the ghastly rents he inflicted. More than once, for lack of foemen in front of him, he was able to turn his attention to his captain, and to render him timely help when sorely pressed.

The Taunton men and the miners stood the full brunt of the charge, and so sturdily was the impact of the trained forces met that they retired discomfitted, leaving many of their comrades dead upon the field. A cheer broke from the Duke's men as they saw their success; then came a dread and soul-stirring murmur,

bearing the most ominous and fatal news possible when the issue of the battle was as yet undecided. The ammunition had given out. The murmur swelled to a wail of despair, for the King's Horse were again preparing to charge their as yet unbroken front. Swaine looked at Annersley, and noticed that his eyes were bloodshot, whilst his face wore a fierce and determined expression as he stood resolutely facing the gathering troops. Jack knew full well that his captain had heard that wail of despair. While he was yet looking at him, Hubert suddenly staggered and fell to the ground. Quickly springing forward, the devoted follower lifted his master, who pressed his hand to his shoulder. "Ammunition! ammunition! for the Lord's sake, get them ammunition!" he said in a weak voice.

"It be too late, zir, too late," answered Swaine huskily; "be you much hurt, zir?" he continued anxiously.

"Yes, Jack, I am dying," answered Annersley with a groan; "you can do me no good, lad, I have done my best; quick! quick!"

There was a loud report, louder than the noise of musketry, quickly followed by another, and yet another; it was a sound heard above the prevailing din of the battle and caused a momentary lull in the conflict.

"Hark!" said the wounded man feebly, "the cannon. All is indeed lost; save yourself, Jack, whilst there is yet time; they cannot hurt me now," he concluded with a faint effort at a smile.

Swaine noticed that the fierce savage look had gone from Annersley's face, and that it was now of a livid hue.

"It be not zo bad as that, zir," he exclaimed

encouragingly; "Mistress Grace will soon make 'ee well."

Yes, he had heard Jack's words, for his eyes glistened for a moment at the mention of her name; but he was too faint to speak, and was fast losing consciousness. There was a sound of many galloping horses that caused Swaine to rise from his stooping position and look around him. He saw the fearless look of the men as they stood with levelled pikes to meet the charging horsemen. He had hardly time to snatch a weapon from the hands of a dead comrade when the cavalry were upon them. The horse that came in front of him rolled over, its body ripped open by the terrible scythe, the rider falling heavily to the ground. It was fortunate for Swaine that the soldier immediately in the rear was unhorsed by the struggle of the dying horse in front of him. Before he could rise, Swaine had passed his sword through the body of his foe, and seized the horse's rein. Lifting Annersley as if he had been a child, he tenderly placed the almost lifeless body of his Captain across the animal, and vaulted into the saddle himself.

It was not a moment too soon. The long line of pikes had wavered, then broken, and throwing their weapons aside the unarmed rustics had turned to flee; some only to be cut down as they ran; some to find hiding-places, only to be dragged out and slain in cold blood; some to ask mercy and be spared for a few hours that they might afterwards be tortured and hanged by the roadside. Through the confused remnants of what remained of Monmouth's army, Swaine rode with his burden. All passed over the bodies of the dead and dying, none heeding the piteous cries of the wounded, and the appealing glances of the helpless; all were bent upon that one wild rush—for life.

It was not long before Jack Swaine reached the road, and travelling became somewhat easier. He slackened his horse's pace, so as not to overtax its strength.

The morning was warm and fresh, and the sun shone brightly, as it can shine upon a July morning, giving promise of a sultry day. The hoarse shouts of the men upon the moor, engaged in their acts of carnage, could still be heard, and the crack of a musket every now and again, told the tale of an overtaken fugitive.

The "Cause" was lost, irrevocably, irretrievably lost—lost for ever; and we would fain draw a curtain over the spectacle of the disordered troops flying from the field of a bloody defeat, and coming back beaten into the streets of Bridgewater; the heart-rending sight of the wounded as they were led, supported, or carried into the town; the look of agony upon the faces of the women as they rushed frantically hither and thither seeking news of those dear to them. But the people of the West found this battle-field but a mild herald of the terrors to come. It is not, however, with the martyrdom of the West Country folk that we are now concerned, but with Jack Swaine, who so nobly fulfilled his promise to Grace Hewlyn, and eventually reached the Manor, bearing his unconscious charge safely in his devoted arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THIRD

RUN TO EARTH

THREE days had passed since Jack Swaine brought his unconscious burden to the Manor —three days, that seemed weeks to the unhappy people of Somerset. Most of those who had been fortunate enough to escape the perils of the battlefield were in hiding, for plunder, arson, murder, and rapine were rampant. Plunder! Many of the poor villagers had little to lose, but what little they possessed was lost in the attempt to satisfy a soldiery flushed with victory, and savage at the resistance encountered at the hands of the country folk.

The grey smoke arising from yon labourer's cottage comes not from the chimney stack, but from the smouldering thatch of the black and dismantled roof itself, while that large roofless and windowless building with its half-open and battered door, looking as if the next puff of wind would bring it crashing to the ground, is all that remains of what but a few weeks ago was a peaceful homestead—a mute but eloquent monument testifying to the inability of the occupants to satisfy the greed of the unwelcome visitors.

The hardy peasantry bore their troubles with an amount of bravery and fortitude equalled only by their behaviour upon the fateful field of battle. Old and young men were dragged from their homes, and upon the slightest pretext were butchered in cold

blood. Along the road extending from Weston Moor to Bridgewater stretched one continuous line of gibbets—a veritable shambles, not of the carcasses of beasts, but of brave men who had fought for what they considered their just rights and religion.

Fortunate, indeed, were the victims if kind death came to them without their first having been promised life, a promise only made to be broken, and to intensify the agony of the dying. Happy, indeed, were the dead to be spared the brutal scenes enacted in their homes by the libertines made mad with wine and conquest.

But to return to Heathercombe Manor. After Hubert Annersley had been laid in the hall, and it was seen that there was yet life in him, the Squire and Swaine carried him to a small room seldom made use of, and situated in the northern turret of the house. It was not a very desirable resting-place for one in Annersley's condition, but it was the only room in the Manor that might escape observation should a search be made—a search that the Squire felt certain in his own mind would inevitably take place before many days were past.

Grace and her mother soon arranged the apartment as comfortably as circumstances would permit, and then retired downstairs, while the Squire, with the assistance of Swaine, brought to bear the scanty surgical skill picked up during his old campaigning days, and successfully extracted from Annersley's shoulder the bullet that had so nearly terminated his existence.

Fortunately for the would-be surgeon, as well as for the patient, the latter was oblivious to pain during the time of the operation. When it was concluded, both the Squire and his assistant felt they had done their

utmost, yet fully believed, as they left the room, that they were leaving behind them a man whose hours were numbered.

Then had followed the three days before referred to. Forty-eight hours of delirium had intervened, hours of anxiety which, nevertheless, were not without a certain amount of comfort to Grace, for, with terrible earnestness, in the disjointed ravings of his delirium, she had the sweet but sad satisfaction of hearing her name continually upon the lips of the man she loved.

"Get them ammunition, Swaine; for God's sake get them ammunition. Oh! Grace, Grace! The ditch, the ditch! we are lost, lost!"

Then would Annersley sink back exhausted upon his pillow, only to gather fresh strength to utter other disconnected phrases, or attempt some impossible feat in his fever's mad course.

At length the fever seemed to be abating. The patient had slept calmly for a short period, and upon awakening had appeared refreshed by his slumber. The anxious watchers in the sick-room were overjoyed to believe that the wounded man recognised those who surrounded him.

On the fourth day Annersley slept longer than usual, and spoke a few words both to Grace and to her mother. Like most people who have wandered along the banks of the stream dividing them from the land of the great unknown, and who return to this world forgetful of their wanderings, forgetful even of the cause of their illness, Annersley expressed an immediate desire to be up and doing, and would probably even have made the attempt had not Mistress Hewlyn gently but firmly remonstrated with him upon the folly of such a proceeding. Then once again he relapsed into a quiet and peaceful slumber.

Mistress Hewlyn and Grace lost no time in going to the Squire's study to make this favourable report. In their anxiety to tell the good news, they failed to observe the deep furrows of trouble upon the old man's face.

"Father, dear, I thought I heard you speaking with Swaine," said Grace, as soon as they had imparted their information.

"Yes, child," replied the Squire, "Swaine has but lately left me."

"What news? What news?" exclaimed both women at once, as they stood on either side of the Squire's chair waiting breathlessly for his reply.

"Have they heard aught of the Duke?' broke in Grace, as she placed her arm affectionately round her father's neck. This act seemed to bring peace to the care-worn man, for he paused for a moment and looked up with a smile into the pale faces of his wife and daughter.

Then he saw that it would be cruel to add to their anxiety by telling them the object of Swaine's visit, which had been to inform him that the King's soldiers were making a house-to-house visitation in the neighbourhood, and that nothing short of a miracle would prevent them coming to the Manor.

Should Annersley be discovered under his roof, there would be no question as to the sick man's fate. Then what would the discovery mean to him? For himself he cared little—he was an old man; but as he looked upon the fair face of the girl at his side, his bravery faltered for a moment. No; his age would be no protection. It would be hard to be dragged away from them. But the die was cast, and he must now stand its hazard. Why cause his wife and child useless anxiety by telling them of his trouble?

"Oh, father, what of the Duke?" said Grace again, interrupting her father's painful reflections.

"No news of any certain character, my girl," answered the Squire, rousing himself from his reverie, "for whilst it is rumoured that his Grace has been captured, some say he has escaped to Wales, whilst there are others who aver that he is hiding in Wilts county. Has Hubert asked any questions about my lord the Duke?" concluded the old man anxiously.

"No, father; he has not even alluded to the events of that awful day, nor to his injury."

"He has not forgotten to allude to you, my child," said her father, with a forced smile, a remark which brought the colour to the pale cheeks of the care-worn girl by his side.

"Your mother, Grace, always liked Hubert—did you not, dear?" said the Squire, as he took his wife's hand in his. "So did I; but I did not think that a soldier in these troubled times would make a desirable husband for thee. You knew not, my child, that it was always a little cause of difference betwixt your mother and me, that I was not a man of peace, although, in very truth, I really was at heart, and loved to hear her chide me upon my frequent absence from home." Then, looking tenderly at his wife, he added: "I felt the justice of your censure, did I not, my dear? It made me hope that our daughter might enjoy more of the company of a good husband than you did of mine, and I thought it was for the best when Sir Mark paid his court to you, Grace; but perhaps I may have been wrong."

"Did Swaine give you any news of Sir Mark?" inquired Mistress Hewlyn.

"Only this, my wife, that he had heard he was

quartered with the King's men at Middlezoy, but took no part in the actual fight. His company arrived on the moor soon after the Duke's men had begun to give way, but they helped to turn a rout into a flight, and a flight into a massacre."

"I cannot understand why Sir Mark should have kept his commission in the royal forces a secret from us. He must have had some knowledge of the trouble that was brewing," said the Squire, breaking in upon the silence that this information had caused. "Doubtless he would have informed us, had Grace consented to be his wife; you see, husband, the child made up her mind so unexpectedly that——"

"Did Jack tell you aught of Kate?" interrupted Grace, with the object of turning the conversation into another channel.

"Poor Kate!" answered the Squire, with a deep-drawn sigh. "I have bad news of Kate for you, my child."

"Bad news of Kate?" exclaimed Mistress Hewlyn, whilst her daughter's eyes sought the floor, at the thought that she knew to what her father alluded.

"Kate has gone, my dear, and I fear will never return," continued the Squire.

"Gone!" exclaimed Grace, excitedly; "gone! with whom?"

"Calm yourself, and I will tell you all I know," her father said kindly. "It appears," he went on, "that Mistress Coombs, early on that fateful Sunday night, had a few cross words with her daughter in her room, as the girl did not care to assist in the work at the 'Lamb.' This naturally irritated the mother, who was extra busy that evening, serving the Duke's men and the country folk who were constantly pouring into the bar. Giving her daughter

a bit of her mind, the angry mother left her child weeping in her bedroom. After she had been downstairs about an hour, and had seen no sign of Kate, Mistress Coombs began to think that perhaps the girl was really ill, although she had assured her to the contrary. Upstairs she went to see what was the matter, carrying with her some elderberry wine. But the room was empty, and Kate was nowhere to be found. The mother concluded that her daughter had strolled into the town to see the soldiers and learn the latest gossip about the attack. Hours passed; the Duke's forces had moved out towards the moor, and the town was deserted of fighting men. None but old men, women, and children remained in the streets to learn the first news of the result of the attack. Still no Kate appeared. At length, just before midnight, some loafing fellow who meant no good, I'll be bound, called at the 'Lamb,' and not knowing what his information meant to the proprietors, casually mentioned that whilst he was talking with some men on the Weston Road a girl had attempted to pass the guard, and that she would not have been allowed to proceed had she not been recognised as coming from the 'Lamb.' She was a brave lass, the informant added, to venture any distance along that road. Mistress Coombs is naturally in sore trouble, for she cannot assign any reason for such strange conduct; nor has she since been able to obtain any news of her daughter's whereabouts. Poor Jack, brave fellow that he is, quite broke down when he told me the news, for he fears that the poor lass may be dead."

"Dead! father; surely it cannot be as bad as

that. Have they made inquiries of Sir Mark at the Hall? no doubt he can tell about Kate. He must tell," added Grace vehemently.

"What can Sir Mark know of the girl?" asked Mistress Hewlyn in a surprised tone.

"Oh nothing, mother, nothing," said Grace confusedly. "I only thought perhaps he might have come across her when the King's men were in pursuit."

"Yes, my child, that is quite possible; his men have been committing horrible excesses, so, at least Swaine tells me. Hark!" said the Squire, rising suddenly; "what was that?" and a look of painful anxiety came over his face.

Both women guessed his meaning, for the noise of men and the clatter of horses could now distinctly be heard in the courtyard.

"All is over, we have been betrayed," said the Squire, almost in the same breath. "Nothing but a merciful intervention of Providence can save Hubert from being discovered — and then——"

The old man stopped and made an effort to control himself as he gazed at the two terror-stricken women before him. The sight seemed to bring all the old soldier's presence of mind back to him; and he added in as firm a tone as if he were commanding a regiment: "Not a word, not a look from anyone must betray either fear or surprise at this visit. We must extend every courtesy to our unwelcome guests, and trust our destinies to the All-Merciful."

The Squire had hardly finished speaking, and the three had had scarcely time to compose themselves, when the door opened, disclosing one of the King's officers and several soldiers standing in the hall.

"Squire Hewlyn?" said the officer in an inter-

rogative and authoritative tone as he advanced into the room. The man's face indicated that he was a little taken aback by the group confronting him, and again he repeated his question, but this time in a much softer tone.

The Squire made a slight gesture with his hand as if to admit his identity, and at the same time to demand the meaning of the intrusion.

"We have information," said the officer, "that a rebel, who has taken an important part in this rising against His Most Gracious Majesty the King, is in hiding in this neighbourhood, possibly in this house; and you must consider yourself under arrest until a satisfactory search of the premises has been made. I regret," he continued, bowing courteously to the ladies, "that my duty compels me to put you to this inconvenience."

"Sir," interposed the Squire, with great dignity, 'I have served my country in the honourable profession that you yourself have chosen. I know what it is to obey. Leave a guard with me. Search my house, and afterwards, should you need refreshment, my table is at your disposal, and my cellars are at your service. Or should you wish it, I myself will show you over the house; it is old, and its rooms are many."

"Father," said Grace springing forward as the old man was about to rise, and almost forcing him back into his chair, "you had better remain seated." Then turning to the officer with a winning smile she addressed him.

"My father," she said, "is not strong enough to accompany you; the stairs are many as well as the rooms, and as for the keys, he would not know one from the other. I therefore beg of you, sir, to spare

him in this matter, and allow me to act as your guide."

"Your services, fair lady, are hardly required," replied the soldier; "but if you will, you may accompany us. I pray you then lead the way."

Grace moved towards the door; to hesitate a moment would mean betrayal. The girl's head was in a whirl, she felt as if she were treading upon air, her heart seemed to have ceased its beating. What could she do to save *him?*

Once outside the door she turned to her companion and said in the most natural way possible:

"Here, sir, are the keys. I think the gaoler should take them from his prisoner; besides they are heavy, and I would be relieved of the burden," this with a smile. "Shall I tarry here?" she asked, as she indicated the foot of the staircase, "whilst you search the cellars and the rooms below? You may place a guard over me to see that I do not escape," she added with a forced laugh that sounded so hollow and unnatural that she almost started.

"I will take your word, fair lady, in so small a matter," replied the officer; "besides," he added, "there is a guard around the house that you would find a difficulty in passing unnoticed," and he strode off, giving his men orders to commence the search immediately.

When he had gone Grace stood like a statue, her face deadly pale, her lips set. She could hear the noisy movement of the soldiers below, she could hear them questioning the frightened servants, and she knew that the search was to be thorough.

There she stood, a beautiful, but a frail barrier between her lover and his would-be captors. She would willingly endeavour to prevent them from

going to the upper rooms, but what would be the use, what would be the use, she inwardly moaned. Should she plead? No, she felt that also could be of no avail.

Thus she waited, dreading the officer's return. It seemed ages to her before she saw the men, one by one gathering in the hall, and knew that the search of the lower premises was concluded. When the officer returned to her, she welcomed him with a smile, and gently chided him for his fruitless errand.

"Lead the way, my fair guide," was his only answer, as he pointed with his drawn sword to the great oaken staircase, and turning to his men he gave instructions to some of them to follow him.

The staircase itself was lighted by a large window, whilst a smaller one of similar structure admitted the light to the spacious landing above. To the right and left ran two corridors leading to the north and south wings of the Manor House.

On arriving at the head of the staircase the officer hesitated for a moment, and then stepped towards the open window, as if to make sure of the structural arrangements of the house. After gazing out for a second or two, he selected one half of the men to search the south wing, and then returned to the window again. Oh! how thankful the trembling girl felt that his back was turned towards her. But surely the men could not fail to detect her agitation. She felt she was shaking like an aspen leaf with all those eyes fixed so intently upon her.

Presently the officer turned towards her, and there was a sternness upon his face that she could not understand, an expression that she never forgot, though it was but transitory.

"Quick, Wray," he shouted excitedly to the man

who stood nearest to him. "Hand me your flint. Quick! The search is over; the man we are looking for is escaping by a window. Lose not a moment, but go, inform the guard, and kill the rebel should he offer any resistance." He spoke sharply, but deliberately, and as he once more stepped towards the casement, his eyes rested upon the girl again. He saw that her face was transformed. Despair and terror were writ upon every feature. Grace Hewlyn had unwittingly disclosed her secret and confirmed his surmises.

It did not take a moment for him to examine the priming of the gun; there was an ominous click of the clumsy mechanism, and the weapon was at his shoulder. Grace saw all this now that he had removed his relentless eyes from her, and darting forward she clutched wildly at his uplifted arm.

"Back, girl, back!" he shouted passionately, as he lowered the weapon. Then seizing her with his disengaged hand, he pushed her from him with such violence that she fell heavily to the ground. Although feeling dazed and stupefied, she made yet another effort to deter him from his purpose.

"Sir, have mercy," she cried, with outstretched hands. But he noticed not the supplicating girl as he turned to his men and said:

"They have him safely now. Muster outside, men, and I will rejoin you immediately."

Grace buried her face in her hands. Hubert was a prisoner. She heard as one in a dream the heavy tread of the soldiers as they descended the staircase.

"Let me see him," she moaned, wringing her hands in her agony, "if only for a moment, let me see him."

For answer, the stern-faced man only looked down upon the kneeling figure at his feet as if he were in deep thought; at length he spoke:

"You ask me to have mercy," he said, "but you ask me for that which I have no power to give. This man is perhaps your brother, or, methinks, more likely still, your lover. I cannot give you false hopes, for our prisoner is a rebel, who has taken part in a rebellion that has not hitherto been rewarded with mercy. But what mercy I can give, you shall have. Your old father shall not suffer for his treason. This rebel was not found in his house. Your father shall live; but your lover must die." With these words the soldier strode away, leaving the weeping girl alone with her sorrow.

"Die!" she moaned distractedly as she heard the officer leave the house. "Die!" she moaned again. Then a wild desire to see him once more filled her soul; she rose and staggered towards the window. Too late, the courtyard was already empty. With a bitter cry Grace fell back in a swoon upon the floor.

Shortly afterwards two figures were bending over the prostrate figure of the girl. She opened her eyes, and recognised her father and mother. Gently they raised the slight form. The terrified girl clung to her father's arm, resting her head upon his shoulder.

"Taken, taken! Oh! what shall I do? for he will die," she sobbed.

"He is a soldier, my child, and carries his life in his hand. You would have been a soldier's wife, and should be brave in adversity, child. Trust in God, He is ever merciful. Trust in God," said the Squire, in a voice trembling with emotion.

Grace raised her head to that kindly face, but as she did so she gave a slight start.

"Father," she said, "I can hear him calling, even as he did in that terrible delirium. I am going mad, father, I am going mad."

"The Lord save you from that!" ejaculated the Squire piously.

"Hark, father, hark! I can hear his dear voice plainly. Oh, it is too horrible!" and the frightened girl buried her face on her father's bosom. The father and mother were distracted at their daughter's terrible excitement. The events of the afternoon had been too much for the poor girl—her mind had given way. What could they do to soothe her agitation?

"Can't you hear him?" said Grace, appealing to Mistress Hewlyn. "Then I am mad," she cried, as her mother made no answer, but only tried to pacify her child.

The Squire who had been listening attentively for some time, suddenly exclaimed :—

"Child, you are not mad, for I hear him also."

A dead silence fell upon the group.

"Grace—Grace!" came a wailing voice, that seemed to echo down the long corridor, as if it came from nowhere. It was the voice of one weakened by illness.

Suddenly the awestruck trio became aware of a figure that stood supporting itself against the wall of the north corridor—a figure, looking so pale and ghost-like, that at first the onlookers thought it was but a phantasm of their overwrought brains. Then the figure moved. It was neither ghost nor spirit, but Hubert Annersley himself; there could be no mistaking that tall form, clad all in white. And there, close to the shoulder, was a dark spot on the linen, plainly discernible as he stood full in the rays of the sun that gleamed through the panes of one of the Elizabethan windows.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOURTH

SWAINE'S LEAP

SIXTEEN miles is considered by most men a good walk, even when it is accomplished for pleasure, and relieved by sundry stoppages at any houses of call that may lie conveniently along the route traversed. But to be forced to walk at a smart pace, tied by a halter to a horse, which every now and again breaks into a trot, with one's hands tightly corded behind one, and this beneath the scorching rays of a pitiless sun, is a performance calculated to try not only the constitution of the strongest, but the temper of even the most seraphic member of the human race. At least, so thought Jack Swaine, as he trudged doggedly along the high road that led across the summit of the Polden Hills (from Bridgewater to the towns of Glastonbury and Wells), a prisoner in the hands of the King's soldiers.

Swaine's tall, burly form made the trooper who was riding at his side look insignificant by comparison, and even the animal to which Jack was tied had the appearance of being undersized. The prisoner's lips were swollen, and his throat parched with the white dust raised by the hoofs of the horses in front of him, as they traversed a road, the foundation of which seemed to be composed of the solid limestone itself. His thoughts were scarcely bright ones, for he knew full well that ere many days had passed over

his head, the fate of a common malefactor awaited him. Only give him the chance, and he would fight. In all probability it would only be the means of bringing about the end more speedily; but what cared he for that; he had to die, and, under present conditions, what odds did a day or two sooner make to him? Besides, it might be the means of his ridding the Duke of one or two enemies, for the men who tackled Jack Swaine would have no light task.

Surely, thought the weary man, they would halt soon, or was it their intention to reach Glastonbury that night? Even in the latter case, it was a matter for speculation as to whether he would get any food to appease his hunger or water to moisten his lips. Luckily the road during the last two miles was more shaded, and, as the sun sank lower in the sky, the air became cooler, making the forced march a little more easy to tolerate. The great plain could be seen stretching for miles upon either side of the road, but the prisoner's eyes only wandered to the side where he could see the little square towers of the moorland churches peeping out between the clusters of trees upon the hillocks that appeared so diminutive on the moors below. His eyes lingered long in the direction of Weston Moor, which seemed to exercise a strange fascination over him, and to give rise to a feeling of restlessness. He longed to make a dash for liberty, but how? The rope that held him prisoner was securely fastened to the animal at his side; he could feel the knot. He tried in vain to alter the position of his hands; they were so swollen that his endeavours only caused the cords which bound them to cut more deeply into his flesh. No, any endeavour to escape he felt was useless, and so he dismissed the idea as impracticable.

His thoughts then turned to the folks at the Manor. Grace, he was certain (although it was probable that she would never see him again), would thank him in her heart, for he knew he had been the means of saving Annersley from capture, and he felt sure that both the Squire and his good lady would look after his mother, and see that she did not want. His musings seemed to strengthen him, and he forgot for the time being his thirst and aching limbs.

The officers had questioned him, but not a word had he answered. He had taken a leading part in the fight; this he had heard them say. Well, he would remain dumb, like the surly dog they put him down to be. So he walked along with downcast eyes, endeavouring to pass the weary moments by watching the strides of the horse. Now and again he even smiled to himself as he felt how his long legs stood him in good stead, for he had little or no difficulty in keeping pace with the animal.

They were passing through Loxley Wood. A halt was evidently about to be made, and Swaine wondered how he would be affected by it. He was not kept long in suspense. When the troopers had all dismounted, he found that the only difference it made to him was that he was tied to a tree instead of a horse; his sole advantage in the change being that he could rest his back against the accommodating oak to which he was secured. He could not sit down, the rope by which he was held being too short to allow of that luxury.

Yes; this was Loxley Wood. He knew the locality well. Oftentimes had he driven his waggon laden with corn through this very place, and allowed his team to nibble the green sward that grew for a hundred yards or so on either side of the road,

whilst he plucked and filled his hat with the blackberries, that in the fall of the year grew and ripened to perfection all around. Or, if there was no fruit to be found, he had thrown himself upon his back to enjoy a short siesta beneath the shadow of the trees that formed just here a natural shelter and resting-place both for man and beast. On looking around him now, he came to the conclusion that many of the men and animals were more urgently in need of rest than he. What he envied them was their food, and, above all, their drink; but dog though he was in his captors' estimation, there did not appear to be the slightest intention on their part to cast him even one single morsel to appease his appetite.

Were they going to stay there for the night? Swaine had endeavoured to satisfy his curiosity by listening to the scraps of conversation that now and again reached his ears, but as yet he had not been able to learn anything of their intentions. Four of the officers were coming in his direction; no doubt they were going to question him again. Two of the younger men, the second and third captains he took them to be, seemed to dispute upon some point, for their voices were raised. As they approached he heard one say: "I'll wager you that I can do it."

"Done, for the price of a horse," said the other, holding out his hand to seal the bet.

"Nonsense, man," put in the eldest of the four, who was evidently the major; "why, you could not even jump it on a horse, let alone with those spindle shanks of yours."

"Just mark it out, and see," exclaimed the first speaker angrily.

"I'd wager another horse with you, only I think

a mule would be more in your line," said the major sarcastically as he picked up two stones and placed them nearly twenty feet apart.

"Come, come," said the man who had accepted the wager; "by my troth, I'll swear it was an ell wider than that." Again the four voices were raised in angry altercation, and it appeared that the disputants would not be able to agree upon the terms. Suddenly one of them turned to where Jack was standing, and pointing to him, said: "Let this sulky rogue here say what the distance was; he was there, and probably knows the place well. How wide, fellow," he continued, addressing Swaine, "was that —— ditch that some of your rascals crossed. As wide as this?" he concluded, pointing to the stones.

"Eh, wider 'an that, zir," answered Swaine, forgetting his resolve not to speak at the prospect of seeing some sport, and having the monotony relieved for a short time. "Wider 'an that," he repeated, as the questioner moved the stone with his foot. "That bain't no jump at all," and again the distance between the stones was increased. "An' that bain't no jump, neither," Swaine reiterated sullenly, as another foot was added to the width.

"Why, the man's a fool! He's making the thing impossible," exclaimed the officer who had set himself the task.

"Vool or no vool," said Swaine, "I tell 'ee that bain't no jump." And the other men, anxious to make the task as difficult as possible, and, at the same time, to make sport of their comrade, moved the stones still further apart.

"It 'ud be var nearer the mark," said Swaine "if 'ee put 'un to yon tuft of grass."

"Oh, the fellow's a brainless dolt, and I'll wager with nobody," said the officer who had been anxious to make the bet, assuming an air of disgust.

"Then you've lost, man—lost fairly and squarely," exclaimed the other three in a voice.

"Lost! have I? on the word of that?" and he pointed to Swaine with a sneer.

"Why, he's told you it's no jump, man. You go and lose your temper and your bet, and then refuse to acknowledge that you are beaten," said the major, winking at his companions.

"If that lout can jump it, then I'll own I'm beaten, but not else," was the angry retort.

"Can you jump it, man?" asked one of the four, turning to Swaine.

"I zay put me down vor a vool if I can't," was the somewhat contemptuous reply. "I'd like a drink of water," he continued, hoping he might benefit to some small extent by the wrangling.

"Water you shall have, and cider, too, later on, if you do it. What say you?"

"I could do it, zir, and will show 'ee how, if zo be it pleases you," said Swaine, hardly able to conceal his excitement at the turn affairs had taken. Orders were quickly given for him to be released, and his hands set free. The soldiers were formed in two long lines, leaving a clear space some six feet wide in the centre, whilst at the end of the line two men were placed with their flint-locks primed and ready for use.

The long files of men were full of excitement, craning their necks in order to obtain a better view of the preparations which were being made for the leap; and laying wagers among themselves upon the result, wagers that would enforce economy upon the losers for some weeks to come.

The ground was marked out, and all the preliminaries had been arranged, yet the prisoner showed no signs of agitation. As a matter of fact he was the least excited of the company, and stood quiet and self-possessed, with an air of confidence, as he rubbed his hands after the cords had been removed, in order that he might induce the circulation to return to his benumbed fingers. He looked neither to the right nor to the left, though he was the observed of all observers.

At length he raised his eyes, and gazed down the long row of men, as he tested the springiness of the turf with his foot.

He was ready to perform his task. Stepping back a few paces, he stood swaying his huge form for a moment, then, like an arrow from the bow, he sped towards the mark. The next instant, amidst almost breathless silence, he was high in mid-air leaping through space. He alighted a good foot beyond the allotted mark, but touched the ground only to spring forward again, and yet again, the third time landing with such terrible rapidity and force against the two men who were placed at the end of the line, that he sent them sprawling upon the ground, where they lay momentarily stunned. Then followed the sound of the crashing of branches, as Swaine, a prisoner no longer, parted the thicket, and forced his way with lightning speed through the underwood.

A baffled shout rent the air, and the wood resounded with the crack of musket shots. Save for the blood that flowed from the scratches on his face and hands, caused by the brambles, Swaine was unhurt. He felt that while there was yet daylight, it would not be prudent for him to leave the friendly shelter of the wood, so when he had placed a con-

siderable distance between himself and his enemies, he resolved to move with caution. He could distinctly hear the voices of the men in the distance, searching the wood. He quickly made up his mind what to do, and commenced stealthily to double back behind his pursuers, feeling that if he could only succeed in eluding them until darkness set in, he would be safe, for he had the advantage of knowing every inch of the country round.

The voices grew more distinct, and sounded decidedly nearer, so down upon hands and knees the fugitive went, and began crawling like a serpent in the opposite direction through the undergrowth. Suddenly voices sounded quite close to him. Without a moment's hesitation Swaine sank down in the midst of the bracken, and lay so still that even a squirrel, as he glided up the straight and tapering trunk of a fir-tree, and commenced to leap from branch to branch, failed to observe the silent intruder. Every now and again a blackbird, disturbed by the searchers, would fly, uttering its frightened, noisy note, right over Jack's hiding-place. Presently the voices began to get less distinct, and looking heavenwards through the thick foliage, the fugitive noticed with joy that the wood-pigeons were leaving the moorland cornfields, and making their way home to their nightly resting-places in the branches of the fir-trees. Yes, it was getting dusk, soon all woodland life would be at rest; yet the watcher knew it would not be safe to venture forth until nearly midnight, at all events. There he sat, whiling away the weary hours as well as he could. At length, tired with waiting, he rose silently from his couch amid the bracken, and, looking stealthily around, made his way to the edge of the wood. Once again he was in the open, a

free man, and a pang of joy shot through his whole frame. Yes, the quarry had broken from the cover, but there was no "Tally ho!"

Jack Swaine felt that he must make the most of his time before the moon rose. He knew an old man whose occupation it was to cut the reeds from the ditches and rhines of the moors. The old fellow, who was generally credited with being half-witted, lived just on the outskirts of Weston Moor. If he were still alive, Swaine felt sure he could, at least, reckon upon a crust of bread and a night's shelter. He was not afraid of pursuers now. The nearer he got to the scene of the battle the safer he felt in the knowledge that the King's men had left the field almost immediately after the encounter, and had sought more congenial quarters in the neighbouring towns. Nevertheless he deemed it prudent to seek the shelter of every friendly hedge he came across, for fear of surprise at any moment.

The moon would rise soon; in fact already he could see its reflection in the heavens. He hurried along until at length he saw his destination looming in the distance. There was the cottage, looking nothing more than a tumbled-down old barn. Part of its roof had been carried away by the wind that at times blows so relentlessly across those bleak and unsheltered flats. He could plainly see the reed patches made by the owner in the attempt to keep it water-tight. Two square cuttings in the walls might once have been windows, but now they were stuffed up with mud and rushes, and the only indication that this tumble-down hovel was a place of human habitation lay in the fact that there was a tiny chimney at one end, and at the other a door, too low to allow a man of medium height to

enter without stooping. Jack's first act was to step softly to one of the patched-up windows, where he stood listening breathlessly for some moments. Not a sound fell upon his attentive ear. He then moved to the door, but as before, all within seemed silent as death. He gently pushed, but it did not open, doubtless on account of some heavy obstruction placed against it on the inside. The place was evidently occupied.

Swaine next knocked gently, at the same time placing his ear to a crevice, but still no sound came from within. He knocked once again; louder this time. His efforts were evidently to be rewarded, for he fancied that he could hear somebody stirring. Then he distinctly detected the sound of steel being struck against flint. Tapping at the door once more, he drew back into the shadow cast by an adjacent hedge. After some minutes of suspense that seemed hours to him, he saw a light beneath the door, and heard somebody removing the obstruction. Presently the door slowly opened, and Jack was immensely relieved to see his old friend, the reed cutter, standing on the threshold. Coming forward he said hurriedly:—

"Hixey, don't be aveared. It's me, Jack Swaine. For God's sake, man, give me some water and a crust, vor I'm wellnigh starving."

"Jack Swaine!" exclaimed the old man in astonishment. "Yes, Jack Swaine it be," he said, as he held his light aloft to get a better view of his visitor's countenance. "I bain't aveared a naught," he continued, "but what be 'ee a doin' here a' this time o' night? Coom in, lad, coom in."

Jack was not slow to avail himself of the invitation, and soon explained the reason of his nocturnal visit to his host, who had taken a huge hunch of bread and

cheese from a box, in a corner that apparently served as a store-cupboard. These he placed before the starving fugitive.

"There 'ee be, man, an' there be a bit o' relish as well," he said, as he proffered a large onion to his guest. "I be mortal glad to zee 'ee, and it be a mighty blessing as I did not zee 'ee the last vew days;" and the old fellow shuddered. "I've zeen plenty of 'ee vriends, eh! plenty of 'em," he said, stretching out his bony hand towards the door. "Yes, yes," he continued, in a hoarse, croaking voice, "old as I be, the viends made me dig—dig—dig—vrom morn till night, and night till morn; no rest for the old man, no rest, ha! ha!" he chuckled with a hollow laugh. "That weren't the worst; no, the devils made me bury 'em, me, old Hixey, lots of 'em as I knowd vrom boys. It were turr'ble, it were turr'ble," and the old fellow covered his face with his hands.

"There, there, it be all right now," answered Jack soothingly, thinking the old man was wandering, "they won't trouble 'ee again."

"Eh, Jack, there was mortal vew of us, and it were hard work, lad, the devil's work. But I gave a separate grave to her, yes, and a deep one too, lad. I did that wi'out any asking, vor 'ee aunt's zake, Jack, vor 'ee aunt's zake. She's been mortal good to me, zo tell her that I dug a deep one, wi'out the asking, mind 'ee, tell her that. I knowd t' poor lass zo zoon as I clapp'd eyes on her."

"Knowd who?" exclaimed Jack, putting down what little remained of his meal. "Knowd who?" he repeated.

"Why, Mistress Kate Fletcher, 'ee coos'n, lad, 'ee coos'n, 'ee coos'n," replied the old man, laying increased stress upon the words at each repetition, as he looked fixedly at Swaine, whose face had turned ashen

white, while a fearful look of distraction crept over it.

Like a tiger, Jack sprang from his seat, his eyes fixed on the speaker, who quailed at his approach. Hastily seizing the piece of burning wick that served as a candle, he held it with a shaking hand in front of the trembling man's face.

"Hixey," he said in a husky gasp, as he grasped the old man's arm, "dost thou mean it, or dost lie? Tell me, man, quickly, or I'll shake the life out o' 'ee."

"Jack Swaine," replied the old man in a quavering voice, "I tell 'ee they made us dig, and when the hole were big enough, they flung the bodies in, and we covered them wi' dirt. I zaw the girl, I tell 'ee. I heard 'em talking 'bout her. Yes, yes, I du remember, I heard 'em zay——"

"Go on, Hixey, go on man," said Swaine, shaking the narrator's arm, and keeping his eyes fixed on him.

"I heard 'em zay as how she be zome lass as coomed out to 'em night avore, and did ask vor a gentleman as called himself Zir Mark Noble."

"Zir Mark Noble," gasped Swaine, loosening his hold of the man's arm, "what could the poor lass want wi' him?"

"Her lover, they du zay they thought he were."

Jack said nothing, but returned to his seat, and Hixey continued:

"I waited until nightvall, tired that I were, and then I dug, dug, down, down, so that t' poor lass should not be disturbed. Tell Mistress Coombs as I did that, will 'ee, Master Jack?" concluded the speaker, shaking his white head with an air of satisfaction.

"What could the poor lass want wi' him?" Swaine moaned to himself as the old man tottered towards a cupboard in the wall.

"And gi' her mother this. I vound it, lad, eh! I vound it. Tell 'er old Hixey vound it; and it be worth a siller crown piece, a siller crown piece." The old creature's eyes sparkled at the very thought as he handed Jack a small bronze crucifix.

"Where did 'ee get thick?" asked Swaine, hardly looking at the token.

"I'll tell 'ee, lad, I'll tell 'ee. I did zee her little hand gripped together tight like this," and the speaker clenched his bony hand to better illustrate his meaning. "I thinks to me'sel as there be zummut there, and when I opened the hand I vound that; you gi't to Mistress Coombs, and tell her it's worth a siller crown, lad."

Jack raised the little cross to his lips, but before they touched it, his eye caught something that made him look again. Taking it nearer to the light, he examined it minutely. Yes, there was the escutcheon he had so often seen over the door of Stow Hall. He understood it all now, and with an oath he dashed the emblem to the ground, but then a thought seemed to strike him, and he picked it up again.

"My poor lass, my poor lass!" he groaned, and great tears coursed down his cheeks. "Maybe I shall want 'ee again, maybe I shall," he murmured, as he put the crucifix carefully in his pocket.

"Hixey," he said suddenly to the old man who had been looking on in silent astonishment, "Hixey, I be dead beat, vriend; can I stay here till morning?"

"Eh, lad that 'ee can," was the reply, and Jack threw himself wearily on the litter beside his host, who had laid himself down to rest, and was already nearly asleep.

"It be worth a siller crown piece," muttered the old man. "Tell her old Hixey vound un, a siller——" At

that moment the light went out, and the room was left in darkness.

Despite his anxiety of mind, Swaine soon sank into a troubled sleep, and dreamed. He was standing in the porch of the little church at Kilve. Kate Fletcher was coming up the tiny path towards him, clad all in white, as he had seen the May Queen. She saw him, and smiled; but there was something unreal about her. A star of the most dazzling brilliancy shone upon her forehead. So bright was the light which it emitted that it hurt his eyes to look upon it, yet he could not take them away. He tried to move towards her, but his feet seemed rooted to the ground. Whilst he gazed, the light became yet more brilliant, and the girl's form seemed gradually to fade away, until there only remained a glorious meteor suspended in the air where the figure had been. Suddenly it fell to the ground. Swaine rushed to the spot where Kate had stood the moment before, but drew back in horror, for there, right in front of him, was a wide, deep trench, filled with his slain comrades. That was all——. With a cry of horror he awoke.

"Well 'ee bain't very pleasant company o' nights," thought Hixey, as he turned restlessly upon his primitive couch.

Had the old reed cutter listened, he would have heard a sob that even his weak intellect might have understood, for had he not oft been jeered at and buffeted in his youth, and had he not oftentimes wept in secret at the callousness of an unsympathetic world?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIFTH

REAPING

THE sun was already high in the heavens when Jack Swaine, tired out with the excitement and exertion of the previous day, awoke from a deep slumber. A heavy weight oppressed him, for which at first he was unable to account. Was he not a free man, and ought he not to rejoice in his freedom? Gradually, however, his dream and the events of the evening before came back to his memory, and he no longer wondered that depression weighed down his very soul. He must rise, and not waste time. There was one task at least before him that he swore to himself he would rest neither day nor night until he had accomplished, though it cost him his life.

Hixey, for some hours previous to Swaine's awakening, had been up and about. The old man had evidently made up his mind not to be lacking in hospitality to his guest. Before a fire that had been burning brightly for some time, stood an earthenware vessel, filled with warm milk, procured from an obliging cow in the neighbourhood, but whether Master Hixey had tendered adequate payment to the owner of the animal in question, history does not record. Directly Jack's host saw that his guest was stirring, he placed the milk before him, together with a piece of blackish-looking bread, home-baked and heavy. Swaine

thanked the old man in a manner which, judging from the pleased expression that came over the giver's face, fully repaid him for the trouble he had taken to provide an ample if somewhat humble repast.

"Hixey," said Swaine, as he broke the bread and dipped a piece in the milk, "when 'ee are near Ashton Mill, my mother will repay 'ee handsomely for 'ee kindness to me, for I have nought to give 'ee now, man. I must away, var away vrom here, but I du hardly know where to go, or how. If I could but get a zight o' the Squire, he might give me the rent I have ready vor paying him. I veel certain sure he would do that, Hixey. Then I mit go tu the vurrin parts as I've heard ould Croad speak of; I must zee Squire, tu, about zummat else," he concluded thoughtfully.

"Master Swaine," replied the other, with a certain amount of dignity in his tone, "Hixey don't look vor no reward. 'Ee and Mistress Coombs have been mortal good ta me many a time avore now, and it be zeldom as Hixey du git company, zeldom, hee, hee," concluded the little man, with his peculiar rusty laugh, as he thought of the pleasure the novelty had afforded him.

"Avore nightvall I must go to Heathercombe," mused Swaine aloud.

"'Ee dussunt go Bridgewater way, lad, or they'll 'ave 'ee agin, they'll 'ave 'ee agin."

"No, Hixey, you be right there, I could not cross the river. I must go higher up, where stream be narrower, up Tarnt'n way; but I shall not go near town, no vear o' that. I've been caught once, Hixey; now I be vree—vree," exclaimed Swaine, and he stretched out his massive limbs as if to make sure they were no longer bound.

"'Ee won't vind many zouls about, Jack, vor they be all scared out o' their lives, and most du keep within doors, an' no volks du holler at old Hixey vor going on their vields now," he concluded with an air of satisfaction, as he observed his guest drain the last drop of milk from the vessel.

"Hixey," said Swaine after a pause, "the best o' company must part, vor I can't bide still when there be work vor me to du."

Jack rose as he spoke, and stepped to the door and looked out. At first the sudden glare of the morning sun dazed him, but as soon as he became accustomed to it, he eagerly scanned the open country in every direction. The inspection seemed to satisfy him.

"You be right, Hixey, there be no volks abroad. Thank 'ee, Hixey, thank 'ee," he concluded, shaking the old man by the hand warmly. Then he walked at a smart pace across the moor, and his tall figure was soon lost to sight.

The reed cutter felt lonely as he entered his dwelling and commenced to tidy up, preparatory to going about his day's work. He had made a loaf, and was just brushing the hearth before placing it there that it might bake during his absence, when a shadow suddenly fell across the streak of sunlight that streamed through the doorway. With a startled expression the old man looked round, and was surprised to see Swaine standing there, a bunch of wild flowers clasped in one of his hands.

"Be they after 'ee agin?" he said, rising from his stooping position.

"Hixey," said Swaine, in a voice choked with emotion, as he handed the old fellow the handful of flowers, "I have a vavour tu ask of 'ee: place these on the grave 'ee told me of last night, 'ee know which I mean," and

the man, unable to restrain his feelings longer, covered his face with his hands and strode hastily away, leaving Hixey alone in his solitude once more.

"I'll do it vor 'ee, poor lad, I'll do it vor 'ee," murmured the old fellow, as he tottered off in the direction of Kate Fletcher's grave.

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The rebellion was at an end, the militia had been disbanded. Sir Mark Noble had never cared about the wandering life that he had been leading during the past few weeks. Sleeping under the canopy of heaven, that as often as not proved to be little better than a shower bath, or in some old barn with swarms of gnats for company, or even in a strange bed, was not to this noble gallant's liking, and before another night was past he had made up his mind to rest in comfort at Stow Hall. With the object of carrying this resolution into effect, he was riding at a smart pace along one of the narrow lanes that led northward out of Taunton towards the Somerset coast line. He had not seen much fighting, he was thinking to himself as he rode along. It was a thousand pities his company happened to be quartered at Middlezoy when the Duke's army attacked. When his men made their appearance upon the field of battle they were too late, as the rout of the enemy had already commenced.

He had looked in vain for Annersley, and also for that worthy's faithful henchman, Jack Swaine. In the confusion everywhere abounding these two were nowhere to be seen, or, more probably, thought the knight with a curl of his lip, the curs had, like their comrades, my Lord Grey and his hirelings, saved their skins by flight earlier in the day. He was disappointed at the time, but his annoyance had

since been somewhat mitigated when news came that Annersley had been captured, and that his death was only a matter of a few days.

All had ended as he prophesied. Now he would see Grace once again. Her love for the rebel Annersley had, he felt sure, been the means of teaching her a terrible lesson. She would be pliable enough now. Yes, she had loved a rebel, and she might have even continued to love him, although he was defeated and disgraced; there were some women who were fools enough for anything. But a headless rebel, whatever the sentiment that might have existed, could now be of as little account to her as to him.

Sir Mark slackened speed as he drew near to the hills, and left behind him the lanes with their thick bramble hedges, beautiful with tinted flowers and half-formed fruit, interspersed with the vivid hues of the ripening hips and the red of the stony haws, or the tiny, plum-like sloes—some green, others a pale blue—which were just commencing to show traces of their delicate blackish bloom.

The hills were high, and the country was more open. The horse had to labour even at a walking pace up the steep ascent as the road became more rugged and difficult by reason of the highway over which they were passing being less frequented.

At length the summit of the Quantocks was reached, but there were still more hills to climb, and more slopes to descend. The track, however, was weather-beaten and easier to traverse.

The part through which the horseman was passing was devoid of trees. Nothing but a stunted hedge or two dared to defy both the chilly blasts of winter and the scorching rays of the summer's sun, while upon either side of the narrow road the purple

heather and yellow gorse flaunted their gay colours, whilst the tall mountain ferns raised their stately heads as Dame Nature's setting to her daughter Flora's gaudy finery.

Upon reaching the summit of the hills, Sir Mark saw some distance in front of him a solitary wayfarer trudging along the road. Some shepherd no doubt, he thought, who had been tending his scattered flocks on the hills, and he set his horse into a trot. The rattle of the animal's hoofs upon the stones caused the man in front to turn round, and observing the horseman apparently in pursuit, he made a movement as if he were about to leave the path and go down the hillside. But he appeared to alter his intention, for he stopped walking, and allowed Sir Mark to come up with him. The look of astonishment that crossed the pale face of that gentleman, as he brought his horse to a standstill, was comical to behold.

"Jack Swaine, you here?" he exclaimed in a tone of the utmost surprise. "Why, I thought you were under the sod, or at best many a mile from here."

"Yes, zir, if the likes of you had their way I might be in one of them places, but, thanks to my own legs, I be here and alive too——"

"Tired of soldiering, I'll be bound," interrupted the other with a sneer, forgetting that he himself was not too enamoured of the profession. "But you are in luck," he continued, "for that scoundrel Monmouth has been caught hiding in a ditch like a rat. Then your fine captain, too, is a prisoner, I'm told. By Gad!" he added with a cynical laugh, as he eyed Swaine from head to foot, "there will be some fine sights, Jack, better than cock-fighting, or bear-baiting, I'll wager. What a pity it is you

won't be there to see the fun, my lad. You'll have to lie low, very low indeed, for some time to come. That is, if you wish to keep a whole skin, and be buried like decent folks, all in one piece," concluded the valiant knight in a pleasant tone.

"Eh, zir, it may be sport vor them that likes it, vor I'll stake my life they die game," said Swaine sadly.

"Game, bah! you don't know what you're talking about, my fine fellow," said Sir Mark contemptuously. "It looks like it."

Placing his hand within his vest, Swaine took out something that he held out to Sir Mark.

"What have you there, my lad?" queried the horseman.

"It belongs to 'ee, I think," said Swaine, opening his huge hand, and displaying the cross Hixey had given to him the night before.

Sir Mark bent forward in his saddle, and started slightly as he took the little amulet from Swaine; then recovering himself he made pretence of examining it critically.

"Eh, it's mine," he said in a careless tone, as he placed the cross in his pocket. "She gave it you to give me, I suppose. Women's vagaries are many, but I suppose she has come to her senses at last, and sees how impossible it is for me to do as she wishes. 'Twas she who begged me to give her a love token, and I gave her that cross. You are a brave fellow, Swaine, and will make the wench a good husband. If this trouble blows over, I'll give you a marriage portion the day you marry. I always told the lass I would do something for her, but she would hear of nothing but that I must marry her. But you, my lad, are far more suitable to her station than I. Marry——" he added, with a shrug of the shoulders, not noticing the

dark look that had gradually been creeping over the face of the man he was addressing, and whose silence he mistook for bashfulness or acquiescence. "Why, I'll beg thy life for thee, rogue that thou art," he concluded with an air of magnanimity.

"Did she ask 'ee to marry her?" said Swaine sullenly as his hand sought the horse's reins.

"Yes; she vexed me much with her trouble, but I am glad now she has seen her error," was the answer.

"I know the poor lass would never have asked 'ee that, but vor one reason," exclaimed Swaine, his voice hoarse with rage and excitement. "But she be dead now, poor girl," he continued, as he tightened his grasp on the reins, causing the horse to back to the side of the road, "and will vex 'ee no more. Rogue be I?" he said through his clenched teeth. "Curse 'ee for a scoundrel! Curse 'ee, and all thy kin!"

Even if it had not been for his voice, there would have been no mistake about the look upon the man's face; the devil was rising in Jack Swaine, and he held tight to the reins of Sir Mark's horse which, fearing the lash, put back his ears as he backed still further towards the edge of the road.

"Let go the rein, fellow," commanded Sir Mark, as he hastily leant forward to snatch a pistol from the holster.

But Swaine by a sudden movement of his hand caused the horse, with a loud terrified neigh, to rear high in the air, and in an instant the rider was thrown to the ground. But Sir Mark, who was apparently not hurt by his fall, was on his feet in a moment and at Swaine's throat almost before his horse had finished pawing the air. It was but a fleeting advantage, however, for seizing Sir Mark's wrists Swaine forced him to loose his hold, the same instant throwing

him from him a yard and more. Maddened with rage and disappointment, Sir Mark rushed once again at his antagonist, and drawing a dagger from his belt, made a furious onslaught upon the unarmed man, who, there is little doubt, would have received the deadly weapon full in the breast, had he not raised his left arm to ward off the blow. As it was, the steel blade passed clean through the fleshy part, just below the elbow.

It was enough. Angry, and smarting with pain, the young Somersetshire giant seized the knight by the throat. Sir Mark tried in vain to close with his antagonist, but he had not the length of arm to do so. Jack's fingers were tightening around his neck, gradually he was being forced back, struggle as he would; and, as Swaine's grip tightened, a horrible distorted look spread over the knight's face; the veins in his temples looked as if they were about to burst, and his bloodshot eyes were starting from their sockets. He could not breathe; his grip upon the big man's arms relaxed; he staggered backwards, and, as he fell, his head struck, with a dull, heavy thud, a large stone by the side of the road.

For a moment the victor was seized with a mad paroxysm of rage, hatred, and jealousy. Already a dark pool of blood marked the spot where Sir Mark had fallen; but Swaine saw it not as he rose to his feet, and lifted the body of the prostrate man as easily as he would have done a sheaf of wheat.

"Curse 'ee, curse 'ee, Sir Mark Noble," he muttered, as he dashed the body to the ground with all the force he could command. Then he stood still with a savage look of hatred, gazing

with dilated eyes upon his defeated foe. But the fallen man was not dead, for his lips moved.

Gradually the look of passion left Swaine's face as he knelt down beside the lover of his sweetheart—the man who had wrecked his happiness, and would have taken his life but a few moments before, without the slightest feeling of compunction. Bending down, he endeavoured to distinguish the whisperings of the dying man.

"Fetch a priest," were the only words that Swaine could make out between the agonised groans that escaped from those blood-stained lips. The mutterings were indistinct and unintelligible, yet he seemed to want to say something.

"Father," Swaine heard him moan two or three times, and "Father" was the last word that Sir Mark uttered, for the soul had wrestled with the body and was free—free to go whence it came? But Kate Fletcher was avenged; the dead man would betray no more.

Passionless now, Jack Swaine, who had often seen death, and had but lately witnessed the terrors of the battle-field, stood binding up his bleeding arm, and contemplating with a look of horror the dead man before him. Yet no fear, or thought of flight, for an instant passed through his mind as he knelt down and reverently crossed the hands of the corpse as he had seen them crossed on a carved image reclining upon a tomb in Wells Cathedral.

It was the movement of the horse, that had only strayed a short distance along the roadside in search of herbage, that awoke Swaine from his rêverie. The kneeling man rose and looked around him. Already the shades of evening were stealing over the solitary hills. In an hour it would be dark; he

had no time to lose if he was to reach Heathercombe before nightfall. The delay had almost rendered it an impossibility. Should he take the horse? No; he decided it would be far safer for him to trust to his legs. Casting a last look at the now peaceful form at his feet, he walked away sharply in the direction of the Manor. No thought of regret for one moment entered his mind; his conscience was quite clear—vengeance, he understood nought else—and the Duke had one enemy the less. Yet somehow he could hear a voice murmuring "Father," as he sped onwards. What could it mean?

. . . . . .

There was a widow lady at Stow Hall anxiously awaiting her son's return—waiting as she had waited for his father before him. She could have told Jack Swaine the meaning of that one word that escaped from the dying man's lips.

Next day, all that remained of her life's hope, her life's sole joy, was brought home to her. The warning had been in vain. She had lived a life of devotion and self-sacrifice for her boy, only to bury him by the side of her murdered husband. The widow bowed her head in peaceful resignation. She felt her life's work was ended.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIXTH

PLANS FOR ESCAPE

THE day was fast drawing to a close. The few streaks of a rapidly-departing twilight stole through the windows of the old dining-room at the Manor and dimly disclosed two figures in close proximity to one another.

In a large, old-fashioned arm-chair, generally occupied by the Squire, Hubert Annersley reclined. His head rested languidly on a pillow, that every now and again was smoothed and re-adjusted by the girl at his side, ever anxious for his comfort. Very pale and ill the invalid looked, yet there was a happy, contented expression on his face as his companion gently stroked his hair, or whispered sweet words of endearment into his ever-willing ears; words that sound meaningless to all save those immediately concerned; words that sent a thrill of rapture through the souls of the lovers, and made them forget that there was aught else in the world save their undying love for one another. But who can truly define the raptures of lovers? that endless theme of which the poet never tires; that inexhaustible spring from which authors have drawn from time immemorial in their fruitless endeavours to quench an insatiable thirst.

"Grace, darling," said Hubert, with a long-drawn sigh, as he gazed lovingly into his companion's eyes, "this cannot last for ever; would that it could!

At any moment I may be discovered, and then, what is to save me? I must away from here without delay, love, for your sweet sake as well as my own. I know only too well what would be the fate of the whole household if I were found beneath this roof."

Hubert's remark had the effect of translating the lovers from heaven to earth—not a pleasant earth either—and caused the first flutter that evening in the dove-cot.

"Don't let us talk about that now, Hubert, dear," answered the girl in a frightened tone as the stern reality of the situation came vividly home to her. They were so happy but a moment before; why dash the cup of bliss rudely to the ground? Surely the evil moment could be put off, thought the girl, and she continued: "Besides, you could not think of leaving the house until you are ever so much stronger and better. You must be safe now that you are with us, for though the servants were almost frightened out of their wits when the soldiers came and put questions to them, they betrayed nothing."

What would Annersley not have given had he been able to listen to her reasoning? but he knew his enemies well, and he felt they would do their utmost to discover his hiding-place.

"I must go, darling," he said fondly, as he took the girl's hand in his own. "If they would but grant me a few days' respite, then I should have strength to go anywhere. I feel, dearest, that under your care every hour is a golden one towards the time when I shall be my old self again."

"But where, Hubert, can you go?" said the girl entreatingly. "Where can *we* go?" she whispered.

"We? darling—we?" he said in a voice full of

rapture, as he fervently kissed the fair face so close to his own. Then followed one of those long silences so inexplicable to all but lovers.

"Do you really think, dear one, that your father and mother would let me take their child away?" he queried at length, in a tone that showed he had the gravest doubts on the subject. "I should not be a free man a day with you, darling; all tongues would be set wagging to know who was the broken-down man with the pretty nurse," he concluded with a laugh.

"I should hope that you would not want to be a free man if you were with me, sir," retorted Grace, assuming a hurt tone; "and I don't think they would ask any questions about the man at all. But please be serious. Where can you go to be safe? Do, do think; we must try to think, dearest."

"If I could but get to London," he said thoughtfully, "I could hide for weeks in perfect safety in Alsatia, a region close to Temple Bar, dear. The King's men dare not follow me there. Then, being close to the Thames, I should, no doubt, be able to take ship to Holland."

"Hubert, Hubert, I am sure I hear somebody at the window," interrupted the girl, suddenly clutching her lover's arm. "Just now I fancied I heard somebody, but thought I was mistaken."

Both listened intently, but no sound was to be heard, save the pattering of the rain that had commenced to fall.

"A false alarm," said Annersley, but even as he spoke, a tap on the window-pane was distinctly audible. Both peered anxiously in the direction from which the sound came; but it was now so dark that it was impossible to discern anything.

"Fear not, darling," said Annersley, in a re-assuring

tone, "nobody with evil designs would announce himself in that manner."

Footsteps were now heard approaching from the direction of the hall, and in a moment Mistress Hewlyn entered carrying two tall lighted candles.

Grace kept her eyes upon the window, and pointed with a trembling hand. The girl was too terrified to speak, for she could see by the dimly reflected light, the pale face of a man pressed closely against the thick glass.

Annersley was quick to notice the terrified expression that had come over his companion's face. Raising his head slightly from the pillow, he glanced in the direction indicated.

"Why, by all that's good, it's Jack Swaine! Jack!" he exclaimed with so much energy, that he sank back exhausted once more on his pillow.

Mistress Hewlyn went to the window, unfastened the catch, and in another moment Jack Swaine was struggling to draw his great body through the opening. At length he succeeded, and was soon standing by his captain's side.

Annersley gave him a smile of welcome, but Grace blushed, and looked strangely confused.

"So it's really you, Jack?" she said at last.

"Yes, mistress; you may well ask, but it be I all the same. Why, I've been outside a goodish time, but was afeard to make it known to 'ee. Then I zee 'ee a-kissing, and I thought it were Squire, but the Lord be praised it were the Captain," concluded the big fellow, smiling with satisfaction.

"Jack!" exclaimed Grace reproachfully, blushing a deeper scarlet.

"Well, mistress, I may 'a been mistook, but 'ee face was mortal close to his'n, and I could not zee very far.

Are we safe here?" he concluded, glancing anxiously around.

"Yes, but not for long. We were talking over the possibility of Captain Annersley leaving the Manor, Jack, when—when you saw us," said Grace, quite pleased with the excuse she was enabled to put forward to mitigate Swaine's allegation.

"Why, Jack, my lad," said the Squire, who had entered during the last part of the conversation, "how came you here? I heard about your being in undesirable company; how did you manage to escape from their clutch?"

"Well, zir," answered Swaine, "it was like this: you remember yesterday I coomed to the Manor for to zee 'ee. Well, when I left, I was making my way back to the Mill, when I zeed zoldiers a-coomin' in this direction. It were too late vor me to get back an' tell 'ee, zo I hid in the big laurel shrubs. Then I looked up at the window in the turret, but could zee nobody. Then I thought as I could reach the window of the Captain's room, by climbing the big elm, thinking if I could get in I might help him."

"Brave fellow!" interrupted the Squire.

"Well, Squire," continued Swaine, a faint smile coming over his honest face, "I did not feel zo mortal brave a moment later, vor, avore I was half-way up the tree, I heard a shout, and looking down I zee a dozen of 'em a-pointing their flintlocks at me. Zo I coomed down, and avore I could do naught else my hands were tied behind me; there was no chance to take to my legs. Then they axed me a lot a questions, but not zo much as a word did they get out of me. They zaid they'd vind a way to make me speak later on, though. They tied me to a horse, and we marched right through Bridgewater, and never

stopped till we came to Loxley Wood, when I got a chance," and Swaine related how he had leaped for his life. "After I got vree of the wood, I made vor Weston Moor, and stayed with old Hixey, the reed-cutter, vor the night."

"Well, Jack, what next?" asked the Squire, as Swaine made a long pause.

"What is the matter, Jack?" inquired Mistress Hewlyn, observing him stagger and clutch at a chair for support.

"My good fellow," said the Squire kindly, "of course you must be terribly tired."

"And hungry too, Grace," added Annersley softly.

"How thoughtless of us!" said Mistress Hewlyn, as she and Grace hastened from the room, to return in a few moments with a large venison pasty and other delicacies.

The Squire in the meantime had fetched the beaker that stood on the sideboard, and filled it with some of his best red wine, of which the exhausted man eagerly took a long draught; but he did not seem hungry, for he only toyed with the viands which he tried to eat with one hand.

Grace, who had been watching him, suddenly exclaimed:

"Why, Jack, I believe you are wounded."

"Yes, Mistress Grace," he answered; "but it is nothing much."

"Is it your arm, lad?" interposed the Squire. "Come show it me," and the old man carried a light across the room to where Swaine was seated, so that he might more easily inspect the injured limb. "It is a nasty cut," said the Squire as he examined the wound; "how came you by it, lad?"

"A dirk, zir," answered Swaine meekly, "a dirk."

"But you told us your captors did not harm a hair of your head, so how came you with this?" inquired the Squire.

For the first time there flashed across Swaine's mind what he had really done. He had killed the friend of these kind people. He hung down his head, what should he say? he would incur their resentment, perhaps punishment; but something in his inmost conscience prompted him to tell all. So, as soon as his wound had been bathed and bandaged, he commenced, not without a certain amount of trepidation:—

"Well, zir, I was a-tellin' 'ee I spent last night with old Hixey——" A choking sensation came in the narrator's throat and he stopped. After a moment he re-commenced: "I spent the night along of old Hixey, and he told me Kate was dead," he at last blurted out with great effort,

"Dead!" exclaimed everyone, aghast at the suddenness of the announcement.

"Poor little Kate!" said Grace, bursting into tears.

"How could a half-witted man know anything about the girl?" interposed the Squire hopefully.

"Eh, but 'ee does know," answered Swaine in a broken voice, rising excitedly from his seat; "he buried the poor lass," and the tears rolled down the great fellow's cheeks as he uttered the words. "Curse 'ee, Sir Mark Noble, curse 'ee," he continued, as he hid his face in his hands and sank back into the chair.

"Jack, I am so very sorry for you," said Grace, approaching the grief-stricken man, and placing her hand kindly on his shoulder.

"How do you know, Jack, that Sir Mark Noble had anything to do with her death?" queried Annersley.

"I know, zir," returned Swaine passionately, "I know. Why, did she not run away from her mother to go to 'e? Old Hixey told me as how the zoldiers on Weston road heard her ask for him, and when the old man vound the poor girl's body was she not clutching a cross as was his? He told me zo himself," he added fiercely, "when I did meet him on my way here. It was just at the spot where his vather was killed, too, just by the spot." A shiver passed over the speaker as he uttered these words, but recovering, he continued: "I spoke to 'un, and he taunted me with being a Duke's man, and he told me she wanted him to wed her. I did not know what I was doing, vor I velt mad like. His horse reared and threw him—I made it. He was not hurt, vor he rushed upon me with his dirk, but I held him by the throat—by the throat," Swaine hissed through his clenched teeth, and as with flashing eyes he again rose excitedly from his seat, there was the same look on his face that the man who now lay dead had seen but a few short hours before. "I pushed him back, back, back, and he vell. Yes, I killed him, Mistress Grace, I killed him," and the poor fellow broke into a loud hysterical sob.

"You killed him?" reiterated the girl, drawing back with wide-open eyes of horrified astonishment; "you killed him?"

"Yes, I killed him," repeated Swaine in a more natural tone.

"Jack," said Annersley, who had been listening intently to the recital, "a traitor is dead. You have done well, lad, and as I myself would have done."

For some moments nobody spoke, for Swaine's narrative had brought home to those present the

terror of the past few days, and the danger of the present.

The Squire was the first to break the silence.

"Jack," he said, "you must leave these parts, lad."

"I know it, zir, I know it," Swaine answered almost in a whisper. "I only came here to try and zave the Captain."

"Oh Jack," cried Grace eagerly, with a half-credulous confidence in her tone, "what would you do?"

"I would zee him zafe to furrin parts, Mistress Grace."

"Yes, yes, Jack; but how can he leave here?" queried the girl excitedly.

"Easily enough, Mistress Grace, easily enough; money 'ud do it. Jim Croad 'ud do anything vor money."

"Why, is that the man who almost did for me when we rode through the gap by the chapel near the sea?" asked Annersley.

"The zame man, zir, as you hit and made him carry his arm about like a baby vor many a day. He be a smuggler, zir, or a King's man, or anything else when he can make money by it. He'd put you aboard the next boat as does a run, and be only too pleased to get zo valuable a return cargo."

"Swaine," said the Squire earnestly, "do you mean this, lad? He shall have whatever he asks, and as much again, when I hear the Captain is safe."

"Yes, Squire," returned Swaine. "I am speaking the truth, and he would take me too if zo be as you'd ask him. I'd work hard vor the Captain," he said eagerly; "indeed I would, zir."

"If he can take one, Jack, he can take two," said the old Squire cheerfully.

"Zend vor 'e, zir, zend vor 'e; let him be here to-

morrow at nightfall and the Captain's safe, take my word for it," he answered emphatically.

Although two of the men were in sore pain, all sat far into the night discussing various plans for the escape. Once again had the Squire's tenant come unexpectedly to the rescue, and once more would the smuggler of Kilve use his wiles in an endeavour to cheat the Crown of its due.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVENTH

TOWER HILL

THE morning sun shone brightly upon Tower Hill, that Golgotha of English history, and its rays lighted up the faces of a vast concourse of spectators, assembled upon that never-to-be-forgotten fifteenth of July in the year of a lost but glorious cause.

All eyes were fixed upon one spot, a small open space, railed off by a number of stout barriers. So great was the press of the multitude that the heavy beams forming the barricade threatened to give way under the strain.

In the centre of this open space, a wooden platform had been erected. Files of soldiers, in some places four deep, were placed on guard around the structure, although at the moment of which we are writing there was nothing to guard, unless it was the heavy, wooden block that stood out in solitary grimness upon the stage where it was soon to play an important part in a coming tragedy.

Yet this simple wooden block seemed to exercise a strange fascination over the multitude.

It was but a few minutes before ten when a murmur broke forth from the crowd as some figures were seen entering the enclosure, attired in the costumes worn by the sheriffs of the City of London. Following close in the wake of these officials came a tall figure attired in black, with the upper portion of his face hidden by a mask of the same sable hue. In his hand

he carried an axe, the handle of which was of such a length that the bright head of the weapon rested upon the ground and glistened in the morning sunlight.

A convulsive shudder ran through the multitude, and many a face was blanched as the headsman ascended the rude steps leading to the platform.

Presently a rumbling sound was heard in the distance, and a coach, surrounded by soldiers, was seen making its way with difficulty towards the scaffold.

A murmur arose from the throng, and this time it swelled into the subdued cry: "He comes!"

When the heavy vehicle at length arrived within a short distance of the scaffold, the horses stopped and three persons alighted. Two, by their attire, were evidently dignitaries of the Church, whilst the third was a soldier. No sooner did the people catch sight of the latter's stately form than a deep groan of pity rent the air as, with head erect and fearless tread, he mounted the steps to meet his fearful doom. Once on the scaffold, he stood facing the sea of humanity before him, and the people saw again before them those classic features, those large, frank, lustrous eyes, that had fascinated them in days gone by when he was their idol. They were spellbound as they gazed on his handsome countenance. Was he their idol still? How many men were there in that great gathering who would almost have given their lives to rescue him from the clutches of those who they considered were about to murder the upholder of the Protestant cause, and the rightful heir to the throne?

"Is this the man to do the business?" asked the central figure in the drama, turning to the masked man at his side. Being answered in the affirmative, he continued: "Do your work well."

The priests then approached and exhorted him to

confess the wickedness of his past life. He answered them in a clear voice, unshaken even by a tremor in its tone:

"I have had a scandal raised upon me about a woman, a lady of virtue and honour. I declare that she is a lady of virtue and honour. I have committed no sin with her, and that which has passed between us was honest and innocent in the sight of God."

"My lord, you must go to God in His own way. Sir, be sure you are truly penitent and ask forgiveness of God for the many you have wronged," said one of the priests.

"I die very penitent, and die with great cheerfulness, for I know that I shall go to God. I am sorry for everyone I have wronged. I forgive everybody. I forgive my enemies," answered the doomed man, his voice never for an instant faltering.

"Have you not been guilty of invasion and of much blood which has been shed?" were the words of the Church dignitary.

"What name you please, sir. I am sorry for invading the kingdom, for the blood that has been shed, and for the souls that have been lost by my means," was the firm answer as he was being assisted to remove his coat. He then took off his lace neckerchief, and the two priests began repeating verses from the Psalms in loud voices.

"Prithee," said the soldier as he knelt down to the block, "let me feel your axe; I fear it is not sharp enough."

"It is sharp and heavy enough," was the man's brusque reply.

"Here are six guineas for you; pray do your business well: do not serve me as you did my lord Russell. I have heard you struck him three or four times. I

will give my servant these remaining guineas, and he will give them to you if you do your work well. If you strike me twice, I cannot promise you not to stir."

Then he turned and gazed earnestly in the direction of the Tower where his children were—it was a dream of life and of death—and then knelt down, the priests meanwhile chanting their exhortations:

"God accept your repentance. God accept your imperfect repentance. My lord, God accept your general repentance. Father, into Thy hands we commend his spirit; Lord Jesus, receive his soul."

The victim's head was on the fatal block, and directly the prayer had ceased, the axe fell with a thud that sent a thrill through the whole multitude. The blow had but wounded, for the head was lifted. and the eyes looked reproachfully at the executioner. Strong men sickened at the sight, whilst women covered their faces and shrieked aloud in their agony of mind. Again, and again, the weapon descended with its dull, sickening thud, until even the masked man, seized with horror, would have desisted from his task had not one of the sheriffs compelled him to sever the head from the quivering body. The bloody work was done, and the head was held up to the gaze of the populace.

It was the head of James, Duke of Monmouth. The eyelids were closed, but the face in the pallor of death resembled more than ever that of his beautiful mother, Lucy Walters. No shout of triumph rose from one single throat in that multitude, but many a groan, many an oath was heard, and naught but tears and sadness as the people dispersed, for they had come out to see the last sad scene in the stirring life of the man whom they one and all worshipped as a hero.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHTH

CROAD CHEATS THE CROWN AGAIN

A RUDDY glow in the eastern sky denoted that day was about to break, as a heavy waggon rumbled along one of those uneven lanes so common to the county of Somerset.

Large sacks, from which a fine white powder oozed, denoting the contents to be flour, were piled one upon the other in the interior of the conveyance. Very slowly did this lumbering vehicle make its way along the lane, too slowly, indeed, evidently thought the man who walked at the head of the team which drew it, and the crack of his whip became more and more frequent as time wore on, and as the light every moment made itself more apparent.

At last the hedgerows were left behind, and the air became sharper and fresher.

The waggon was now creaking along a grass-covered track, upon either side of which a stream of water ran, pure and sparkling as crystal, bubbling over the stones as it flowed in its headlong race to join the sea.

Not a sign or vestige of a habitation was to be seen as far as the eye could reach on either side, a fact, however, that apparently did not trouble the waggoner. Presently he stopped and gazed ahead. The mist, under the influence of the rising sun, was

fast disappearing, and there, full in view, gleamed the almost waveless waters of the Bristol Channel.

He had not been looking long ere he observed a party of men on the beach, who were engaged in drawing up the boat that had brought them to shore. Their presence was evidently expected by the onlooker, for he evinced no surprise on seeing them. With a low whistle he attracted their attention, and signed to them to approach him.

A few hurried words ensued, and then all set to work to move the sacks in the waggon, disclosing a hollow in the centre, from which a man of tall, massive frame emerged, and leaping lightly to the ground, commenced to assist another to alight from the hiding-place. The big fellow helped his companion gently to the boat, where all, save two, quickly took their seats. A vigorous shove, and the craft shot into deep water, rocking violently as the propellers sprang into the prow.

As the boat with its human freight glided swiftly over the rippling surface of the sea, the waggoner stood gazing for several moments at the rowers. Then the sun rose over the hills, causing the water to sparkle as the oars were dipped. On, on they sped in the direction of a vessel anchored at a short distance from the mainland, its rakish masts and spars, its house-like stern, tending to give the craft a strangely supernatural appearance.

The waggoner smiled a smile of satisfaction, as he saw the ship safely reached, and the human cargo and the boat hoisted on board.

Soon the masts were no longer naked, for the sails were being set, a slight breeze that had just sprung up filled the canvas, and the strange craft commenced to glide gently down the Channel.

There were other spectators of the departure besides he who had brought the fugitives in his waggon.

On a cliff not far distant, an old man and a young girl stood eagerly watching every movement. They had gazed intently at the boat's progress, and now their eyes were strained in the direction of the fast departing vessel. A handkerchief fluttered from the girl's upraised hand, and from the deck of the ship came an answering signal.

"Let us thank God, my child; they are safe at last," said the old man, heaving a deep sigh of relief. "We must return to the Manor," he continued, "for your mother will be anxious, my darling."

"Let us wait a few moments longer, father dear," said the girl in an imploring tone, and she caught hold of the old man's arm to detain him. "We may never see them again," she continued, as she looked wistfully at the little speck in the distance, that now seemed as if it were nought but sails.

The girl's voice was choked with sobs, and tears coursed like rain down her fair young cheeks.

"Come, my child, come," said Squire Hewlyn, for he was the speaker, "Hubert can see you no longer. We have a long distance to go, and I wish to speak with Jim Croad, ere we return to our horses; they must be getting impatient at so long a wait. I am afraid, too, that this weary vigil in the night air will do my darling no good," and the fond father drew the wraps more closely around the shoulders of the girl at his side.

With one last lingering look at what was now but a little white speck, the pair turned their backs on the sea, and walked in the direction of the waggoner, who anxiously awaited their coming.

Jim Croad welcomed them in his high, falsetto

voice, and the Squire, holding out his hand, said: "Jim Croad, take your load to the Manor, and I will pay you five golden guineas for every sack your waggon contains."

The deep-set eyes of the old smuggler gleamed with pleasure, as he mentally reckoned up the amount of his reward. The calculation evidently caused him no small amount of satisfaction, tinged, no doubt, with regret that the fugitives had taken up so much room, for an avaricious smile lighted up his pale and wizened countenance.

He cracked his whip, and the team started on their homeward journey.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINTH

WHAT THEY FOUGHT FOR

A REIGN that had been both inglorious and unprosperous had come to an end. What the country folk of the West, not four years previously had attempted in the cause of "Faith and Freedom," without preparation and without the approval of the nobility, had now come to pass, and James II., the lawful King of the nobility and common folk alike, was a deserter and an ignominious fugitive.

A change had come over the country again; the depression caused by the awful memory of many martyrdoms and banishments, the work of a rascally judge that made even the terrors of war sink into insignificance, must have been forgotten for this one day, or perhaps it may have been the reaction to which even the mind of the humble peasant is liable after so many horrors; suffice it to say that the church bells, long silent in their towers, clanged and clanged again, causing the birds to forsake the seclusion of the dusty belfries, and circle round and round the sacred edifices, disturbed by a once familiar, but now almost forgotten sound.

The streets of Bridgewater town were alive with people, all without exception being gaily decorated with orange ribbons. Faggots were piled in the centre of the narrow roadways, ready to be kindled into brilliant bonfires at nightfall, whilst in the windows of even the overhanging attics, rows of

rush-lights stood that later on would serve to illuminate the town.

A great crowd of people who had been shouting themselves hoarse and drinking "Long life to the Prince of Orange," had just dispersed in the vicinity of the "Lamb." The names of Annersley and Swaine were also frequently heard amid the indescribable din and noise that reigned supreme everywhere, for it was only an hour previously that Hubert Annersley and Jack Swaine had ridden into the town, and were even at that moment snugly ensconced in the well-known parlour of the inn.

Mistress Coombs had been watching the two for some time, and she was evidently well satisfied with the justice they were doing to the tempting viands she had set before them. Her face wore a strange mixture of joy and sadness, for though she smiled and looked happy as she gazed at the returned wanderers, yet there were evidently sad thoughts in her mind that caused her frequently to make use of her apron to dry the tears which would come every now and again to her eyes.

"Ah!" she said, in answer to some question Annersley had put to her, "them was turr'ble times. The King's zoldiers coomed to my house, and vor weeks they made vree wi' all the vood and drink they could lay their hands on, and they could eat and drink, too, I never zee their like avore nor zince. The zellar was vull avore they coomed, more's the pity. I dussunt zay a word vor vear of offending 'em, and as vor Jan, why 'e did zeem vor all the world as if he liked it; they were vor ever making him tell 'em his tales and show 'em his swordsmanship, at both o' which they did laugh most heartily. Jan 'e were a King's man then, and he were never wi'out zome excuse or

other vor to drink his Majesty's health. Drat his late Majesty, zay I, for a sneak and a coward vor upsetting honest volk, and robbing them of their lawful goods. When they did go, not a penny-piece did they leave behind, and as vor Jan, he has never been the zame man zince."

"Well, my good woman," answered Annersley sympathetically, "your trouble is all over now. The Duke may be dead, but his cause lives, although Jack says he would rather it had not been espoused by the Dutch; but the Prince has been mighty kind to us, and he is a good soldier to boot, is he not?" asked Annersley, turning to his companion for confirmation of his statement.

"Eh, zir, that 'e be," replied Swaine, somewhat abruptly, as if he were unwilling to waste time in conversation when he had good honest English fare before him.

"That stocking of thine, Mistress Coombs," continued Annersley, "will soon be replenished with gold, I'll wager, for this is a first-class house, nor is there a better even in London town."

"Ah, zir, you make me veel proud and comfortable like," answered the worthy hostess, "vor you be a truthful gentleman; but now that Kate be gone, poor lass, we have no kith or kin save 'e," and she indicated Swaine with her thumb, "vor whom to hoard it."

"Jack," interposed Hubert, as he observed the viands rapidly disappearing from one dish after another, "you have still a long ride before you, and I am in a mighty hurry to be off: plenty of chance, lad, when you get to the Mill to refresh again," and Annersley smiled as he administered this apparently necessary caution. "Where is your husband?" he inquired, turning to Mistress Coombs.

"Oh, 'e be in the kitchen, vor I do hear him a-jabbering to your man-zervant."

"Tell him, my good dame, to bring the horses round; or stay, perhaps I had best go with you," said Annersley.

John Coombs and Annersley's Dutch servant were sitting on the roomy settles placed on either side of the open hearth. The Dutchman, whose face was very round and red, might easily have been taken for mine host's brother, for their features and complexions were very similar, but in bulk, John Coombs held a decided advantage over his foreign friend. The new-comer seemed perfectly contented with his surroundings, and sat smoking a long clay pipe, and puffing clouds of smoke from his fat cheeks. John Coombs had evidently also been indulging in the fragrant weed, but the last spark had been allowed to die away in the bowl, and he was pointing to the peat fire, the grey smoke from which was slowly curling up the chimney.

"It were all as misty as that smoke there," he said to his companion, "and as silent as the grave. Suddenly," he continued, rising in his excitement, "there was the crack of muskets; I zee 'em spitting vire like zo many burning snakes—burning snakes," he repeated, thinking by the placid expression on the Dutchman's face he had not created sufficient impression. "Like hundreds of thousands of burning snakes," he added, but still his companion seemed unimpressed, and calmly puffed away at his pipe. "I was not aveared. 'On, lads! on!' I shouted at the top of my voice as I cut my way through the bullets that were falling like hail all around me; then——"

The narrator stopped abruptly, sure he must be mistaken;—no; that lubberly, thick-headed Dutchman had actually fallen asleep! This was more than

Coombs could bear, so crossing over to where his companion sat, calmly snoring with his head on his chest, he shook him violently. The foreigner woke up with a start, and looked inquiringly at the disturber of his peace—"then," continued Coombs, shouting at the top of his voice into the unfortunate man's ear, "then their cannon began to roar, and I knew the game was up——"

"Jan! Jan!" interrupted a shrill voice in the doorway, "stop that tattling, will 'ee, vor the Captain wants the horses brought round at once."

Coombs obeyed, but he felt much annoyed that the recital of his deeds of valour should be designated under the ignominous term of tattling.

"I was but telling this young man——" began the host.

"Was but telling?" replied Mistress Coombs scornfully; "why, don't 'ee know that the poor fellow doesn't understand a word o' English?"

The expression that came over John's face was a sight to behold. And so all his tales of heroism had been wasted on a dolt who could not understand them. Considerably crestfallen, the depressed narrator prepared to follow his wife.

Just then Annersley appeared, and uttered some guttural phrases, quite unintelligible to the worthy host and his spouse. The effect on the Dutchman, however was instantaneous, for he rose and made his way towards the stables with surprising alacrity. Coombs cast a glance of indignant scorn after the retreating figure, and then followed to help with the horses, which very soon were brought round in readiness for the travellers, and not many minutes elapsed before they were riding along the old familiar road in the direction of Heathercombe Manor.

EPILOGUE

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

IT was the evening of such another hot and stifling day as that on which our readers first became acquainted with Grace Hewlyn on the terrace of Heathercombe Manor. Yes—let us see—ten years had passed. It must have been ten years, for it was the year of the famous drought. How many changes, some for the better, some for the worse, has time wrought in that half-score years! The old deerhound has long since found a resting-place in the canine burial-ground of the Manor, and only descendants of the peacock that sunned himself upon the garden wall are left to be reminded of their proud ancestor's ignominious end, which took place one moonlight night, when he was carried away by a fox, who seized him by his gay and aristocratic neck, and dragged him unceremoniously to a neighbouring cover, where his body served as a dainty meal for the Reynard family, whilst the cubs made sport with his gaudy, though mud-bedraggled plumage.

Under the same old majestic elm, four persons are resting after the fatigues of the day. They are in exactly the same spot as upon the occasion

when Sir Mark called to invite Grace to the hawking party.

In the old man with the silvery locks who is peacefully leaning back in the easy-chair, we have little difficulty in recognising Squire Hewlyn. Time has dealt leniently with him, for he is still able to ride into Bridgewater or Taunton. True, his journeys are less frequent than when we first knew him, but he still goes and enjoys the exercise. Dame Hewlyn is seated by his side, and, as she listens to his conversation, an expression of supreme happiness and contentment rests upon her face. Her sight must be as good as ever, judging by the rapidity with which her nimble fingers toss the bobbins in and out, and over and under one another, as she forms the exquisite but intricate lace pattern that is developing on the pillow before her.

Close by the old folks, Grace and her husband are leaning against the stone balustrade. They are laughing and talking together, but every now and again the former looks up and casts a wistful glance in the direction of the high-road that can just be seen from where they are standing.

"I wonder if Jack will ever marry?" she says to her companion, presently, in a thoughtful voice.

"Whatever makes you think that I can tell you, my darling?"

"Why, Hubert, because a man ought to be the best judge of a man's feelings," is the prompt retort.

"Have you any suspicions about the matter, dear?" Hubert asks, with an air of mystery. "Perhaps you know a maid who means to capture him. If that be so, it's as good as settled, for there is no gainsaying a woman when she has once set her will on marrying

a man. Man is a helpless creature," he adds after a pause, with a pretence of heaving a deep-drawn sigh.

"Proceed, sir; proceed, for I am not going to deny the latter assertion," interposes Grace, with an air of assumed seriousness.

"Who, then, I pray, is the woman? tell me, dearest, that I may warn the poor fellow of his fate."

"Don't be silly, Hubert, dear. I was but thinking that one day, when Jack's mother is dead, he will be lonely, and any girl would marry him. I know of a score myself. For one, there is Janet Marvin; a nicer girl we have never had in the house, and she is madly in love with him, I know. I always notice that whenever Master Jack is here, the children are sure not to be very far off, and he does not seem very backward in seeking her company. She would make him a splendid wife."

"My dear Grace, you are match-making; it's no use your denying it; it is a clear case," he retorted, as he saw his wife shake her head. "You have set your heart upon it; but let me tell you, no girl could make a splendid wife."

"Hubert!" is Grace's reproachful exclamation.

"Well, there are very few exceptions."

"Am I one?" she says, looking up archly at him.

He is about to tease her by answering in the negative, but, glancing at that sweet, upturned face, he has not the heart to do so, and kisses her fondly instead.

"I sometimes wish Jack would forget the past," he remarks presently; "but a man never forgets," and he lays great stress on the word "man."

"You should have said, Hubert, a man forgets, but

a woman never does; a man lies," she rejoins absently, "and a woman trusts; but then she is only a poor, silly woman."

"Come, Grace, that assertion is somewhat sweeping, is it not?"

"Ah, Hubert!" she exclaims, breaking away from the serious thoughts of the past to which her mind had wandered, "here are the children!"

There is no mistaking the fact, for just passing the bit of road that is visible, Jack Swaine is to be seen imitating the prancing of a horse, though with doubtful success, for no quadruped ever cut such extraordinary capers, and at times the little four-year-old boy on his back is forced to stop shouting as some springless jump almost shakes the breath out of his body. Just ahead of this pair is an elderly woman, carrying a beautiful little girl of about two years old, who looks over the woman's shoulders, and laughs with glee at Swaine's antics. Every now and again, however, her chubby hand goes up to those wide-open blue eyes, kept open with the greatest difficulty, for sleep's punctual herald has arrived, and will soon claim his own.

Grace Annersley, hurrying to meet her children with all a mother's pride, takes the sleepy mite from the arms of Mistress Swaine, with many inquiries and thanks.

Then the child is carried round to everybody in turn. "Say good-night," the mother sweetly commands, as she prepares to hurry with her burden into the house.

"Dood-night," repeats the little one, rubbing her eyes as if she were about to cry.

"The very image of her mother, Jack," observes the old Squire proudly.

"Eh, zir, that she be; the very zame" is Swaine's enthusiastic reply.

"I'se like to be 'ike mother, too," chimes in the little fellow at his side.

"There's an ungrateful son for you, Jack," says Annersley, assuming an injured air.

A girl is approaching from the house; she is coming to take the elder child to dreamland also. Annersley looks at her intently as she draws near. He notices her flushed, shy face, and the suspicions that have been aroused by his wife are confirmed. The child lets go Jack's hand, and the girl lifts him up for his father to kiss. "Like father and mother bofe," he whispers. The reproach spoken in jest had been taken in earnest.

"Providence has indeed been kind to us," said the old Squire gratefully, and his words strike an answering chord in the heart of the woman at his side.

. . . . . .

A very tiny chapel suffices for the worshippers of the parish in which Stow Hall is situated, and the diminutive burial-ground is ample for the accommodation of its dead.

Half-leaning, half-sitting on an ungainly-looking tomb with a large, flat, marble top is a man with back bent almost double with age, and with his shaking head and hands resting upon a stout stick for support. There, in the fine, dry weather, he sits day after day for long weary hours, to prevent, it is said, the urchins from playing at some profane game upon so inviting a counter. His vigil has commenced none too soon, for the first inscription, despite that it has been cut deeply into the stone, is almost illegible. Yet the old man knows it by heart, and repeats it over and over

again, and could point to each line with his stick with unerring accuracy:

BENEATH THIS STONE ARE DEPOSITED THE REMAINS OF
SIR MARK NOBLE, BART.,
OF STOW HALL, IN THE COVNTY OF SOMERSET,
WHO DEPARTED THIS LIFE THE 20TH DAY OF AVGVST,
ANNO DOMINI 1657, ÆTAT 28.

"Like to a spreading rose in vndve time
Plvckt by the hand of death when in his prime,
So was this man whose wife doth sadly movrne,
He cannot vnto her again retvrn."

ALSO RESTETH
SIR MARK NOBLE, BART.,
HIS ONLY SON, WHOM IT PLEASED GOD TO TAKE FROM HIS
MOTHER AT THE EARLY AGE OF 28.
HE DIED THE 10TH DAY OF JUNE, ANNO DOMINI 1685.

Although twenty-eight years have elapsed between the cutting of the first and second inscriptions, the latter is almost as illegible; but the latest inscription is without a scratch, and looks newly cut:

ALSO MALDA,
WIFE AND MOTHER OF THE ABOVE SAID BARONETS.
SHE DECEASED THE 20TH DAY OF JVNE, ANNO DOMINI 1685,
ÆTAT 49.
A PIVS WOMAN ENDEARED BY HER AMIABLE QVALITIES AND
PVBLIC VIRTVES TO ALL WHO KNEW HER.

"BORN TO DIE,
DIED TO LIVE."

It cannot be many years now ere the faithful watcher over the graves of his dead masters and mistress will rest under a plain grass mound not

far from those he so dearly loved and so faithfully served.

. . . . . .

The pink and white blossom has long since fallen from the apple trees in the orchards, and the fruit with its red and yellow patches upon the green indicates that Nature's process of ripening is well advanced. That neatly lined nest of grasses and moss in the fork of yonder broken-down old tree has but lately been deserted by a second brood of young missel thrushes. The male, perched high up in the branches, is warbling from his grey-spotted throat a song of joy and gladness. Here and there on lands hard by husbandmen can be seen with stooping backs, whilst the click, click of their hoes is to be heard as they strike sharply against the stones, and Nature is laboriously assisted to do her work. The corn in the field adjoining is changing its green for a golden hue, and in another month or so will be harvested.

This quiet spot is Sedgemoor—Sedgemoor, thank God! in the time of Peace.

No monument is raised to mark the place where that last battle on English soil was fought; no memorial to indicate where so many brave men fell; nothing is here but Nature—Nature in all its bountiful grandeur. Some day it may be different; one day, perhaps, man's sepulchre over the dead may be erected. Now the plough passes ruthlessly and relentlessly over their resting-places, and turns up —we shudder—but no; it cannot touch her, for she lies buried deep, deep, deep down in "Dead Man's Field."

THE END.

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